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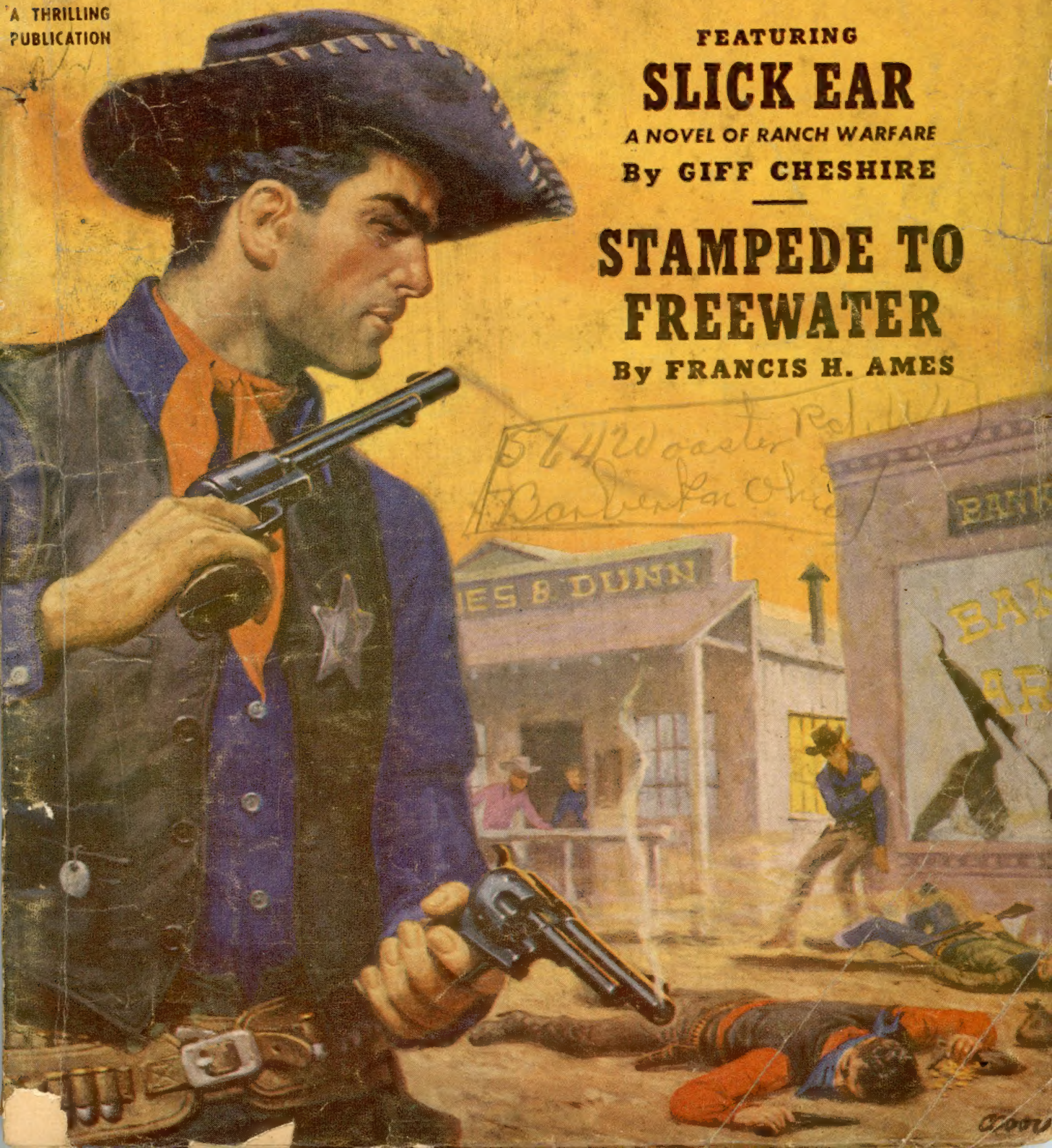

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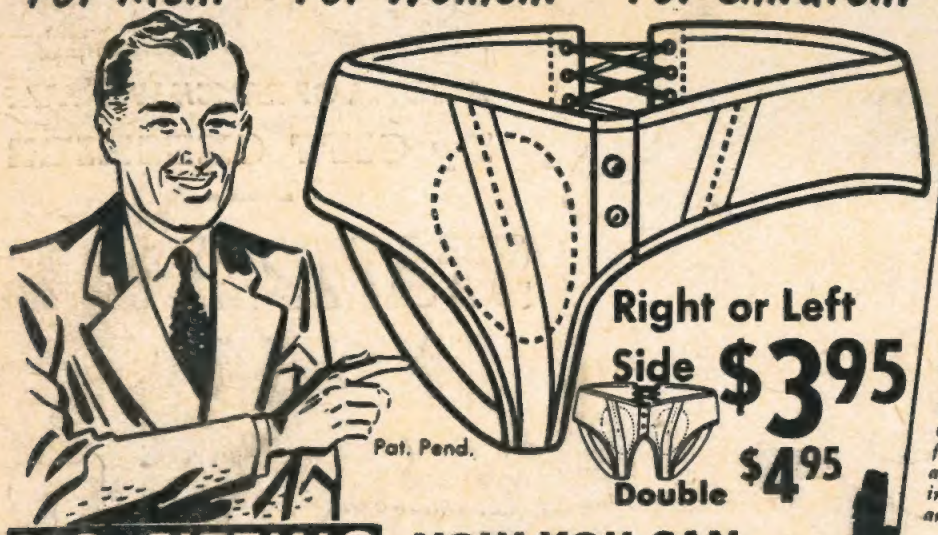

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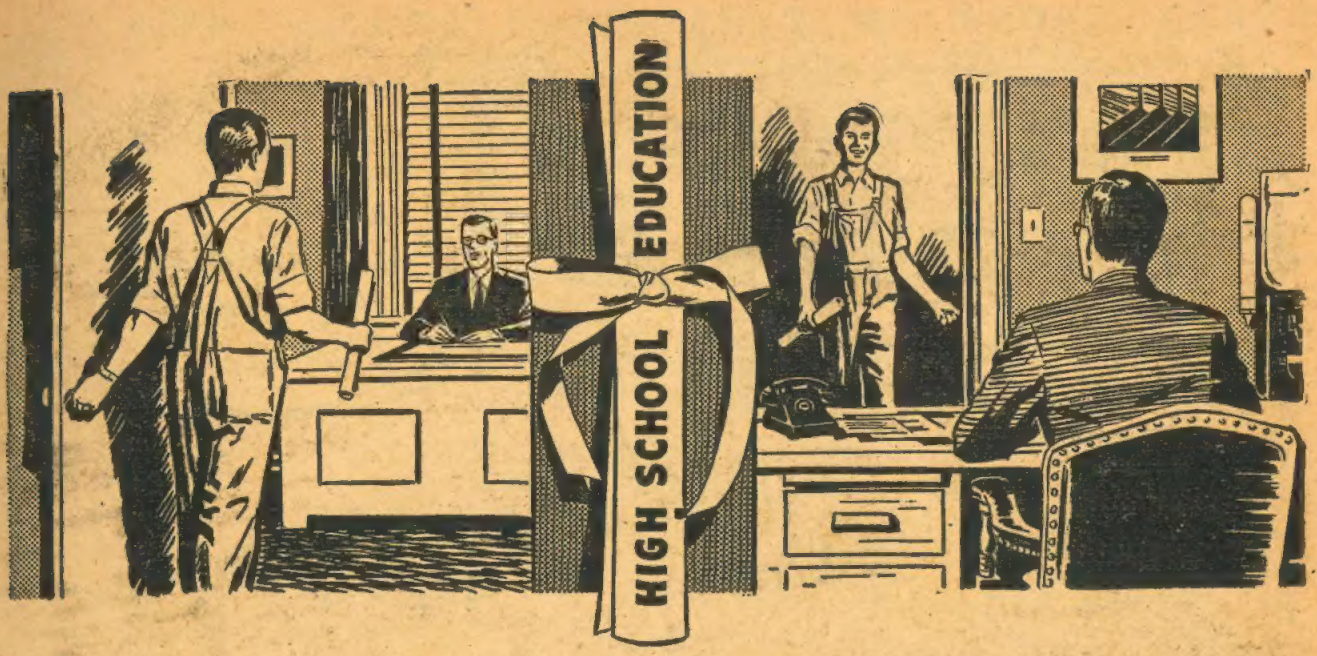

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Vol. 77 No. 1

MAY, 1952

TWENTY-SIXTH YEAR

A New Complete Novel

SLICK EAR — **Giff Cheshire** — **12**

Gambling was in his blood . . . but he left the green baize tables for a bigger game with the lives of men and the happiness of women at stake

•

A New Western Novelet

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MORRIS OGDEN JONES, *Editor*

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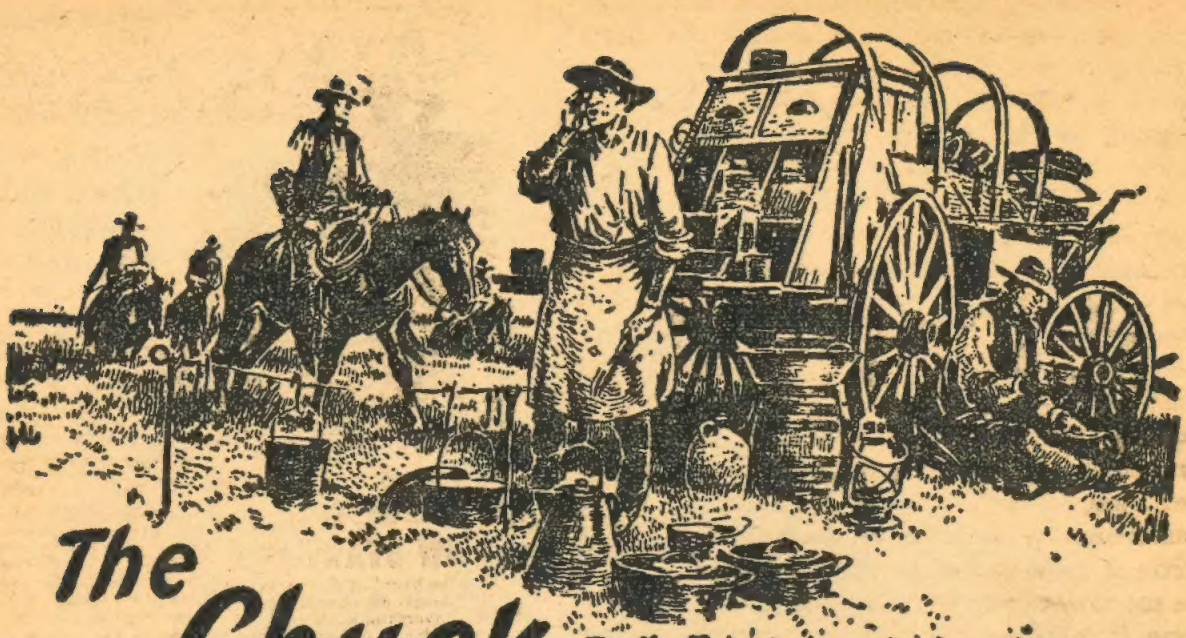

The Chuck Wagon

WILDERNESS ISLAND

By FERRIS WEDDLE

THE VISITOR in Boise, Idaho, is likely to raise an eyebrow and ask the inevitable question: "Where is this wild and wooly West we've heard about?" Local citizens, proud of their "City of Trees," which has grown into a modern, teeming city from sagebrush flats in less than one hundred years, are tempted to say, "It went thataway."

But usually they will point to the mountains and say, "We have plenty of wilderness back there if you want it rugged."

They are right. Much of the interior of Idaho is still a wilderness island, sparsely settled with a few miners, ranchers, packers and guides, forest service and game personnel, and strange men who seek solitude. One hour's drive from the neon-glitter of Boise and there is the wilderness, with the mountains piled one against another, the streams rushing down steep, rock-jagged canyons, with roads that twist torturously up the steep mountain passes. And the farther you go, the worse the roads are, until there are only trails that seemingly lead into a limitless wilderness. Here and there, you'll see evidences of man's effort to tame the wilderness. Atlanta, some eighty miles from Boise, is such a place. . . .

Serene and Isolated

A huddle of old, gray buildings, Atlanta sleeps peacefully in the summer sun, and lies buried under several feet of snow during the winter, completely isolated from civilization. A few miners and claim owners still tramp through the rutted streets. Some are old men who remember when several thousand people populated this area. They remember when the ledge that yielded over five million dollars in gold ore was discovered back in 1863, by miners who had wandered in from the gold fields around Idaho City.

The camp which sprang up remained nameless for a while, and then was given the name of Atlanta because most of the residents were Southerners, and the news of the battle of Atlanta, Georgia, reminded them of it. Nature had been generous with treasures, but made men work for them.

Unlike most gold-boom towns, Atlanta never had much of a crime problem. People

were too busy fighting the snows that kept them isolated for months at a time. No road was hewn out of the steep mountains until the early 1870's, so freighting outfits brought supplies to Rocky Bar, fifteen miles below Atlanta, and then laboriously packed them in by mule and horse, at twenty-five cents a pound. When a semblance of a road was torn out of the mountain pass separating the two gold centers, block and tackle were needed to help the heavy wagons over the worst spots.

But Atlanta prospered, and by 1885 three thousand or more people lived in the vicinity. There were many victims of the severe winters, and of mine accidents, but few men died from the violence of six-gun law. Mail carriers, who came by ski or snowshoe, had the most perilous job. In time, the route became known as the most dangerous in the West, for six carriers lost their lives.

Crime Ripples

There was crime in a minor way—like the aged Chinese who robbed sluice boxes. Citizens protested and the thief was brought before a miners' court and kindly asked to reveal where he had hidden the loot. When he timidly refused, he was persuaded gently by being lifted from the ground by a noose around his neck. He then talked, and was banished from Atlanta.

A few citizens committed suicide. One man did so because he found that the teeth for which he had waited for over a year did not fit. Another man was shot through his lower cheeks while he was drinking at a bar, the bullet passing between his jaws. This shooting puzzled Atlantans for many months and was never solved.

In a way, one might consider the business of medical attention a crime, for it was left to the women to be the doctors, the town having no real sawbones. The things they brewed up just made folks stay healthy out of fear. For instance: sagebrush tea for Rocky Mountain fever, Oregon grapefruit and chokecherry-root tea for stomach ailments. The brandy and other liquors added to these concoctions induced some of the more rugged to try them.

Atlanta had no dentist either, so the local blacksmith took on this chore. He gleefully and capably extracted teeth with a pair of forceps he made from scrap metal. Food prices were, amazingly, higher than today.

[*Turn page*]

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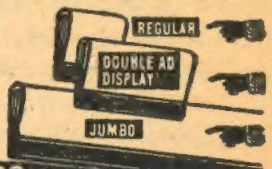

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Flour was $33 a hundred pounds at first, and kerosene, the main means of lighting, was $8 to $9 a gallon. Potatoes, for which later the Gem State was to gain fame, were up to 30 cents a pound.

Only one major mine is in operation today in this area; but prospecting still continues—for more precious ores now, like antimony and rare earths. Winters still make Atlanta one of the most isolated hamlets in Idaho. Roads are closed for weeks at a time, so mail and food supplies are dropped by plane. It's still rugged, but those who stay the year around like it that way.

Other Ghost Towns

Atlanta is only one of several ghost or near-ghost towns in Boise's backyard. There are evidences remaining of Featherville, Rocky Bar, Placerville, Centerville and Quartzberg, while Idaho City dreams of the past and caters to thrill-seekers and tourists with a curious desire to find something of the Old West.

Northward from Atlanta is another town, Stanley, which retains some of the spirit of the Old West, although it is a product of the early 1900's, and is more of a rancher's town. Sitting on the desert flats, with the Sawtooths as a backdrop, Stanley is a jump-off for the primitive area.

Actually there are two Stanleys—Lower and Upper—and herein lies intrigue, for the feud between the two villages has been going on for almost forty years. The location of the school and the postoffice was the main cause, apparently, for this feud. Lower Stanley was established first, with both the school and postoffice located there; then Upper Stanley came into being and an Upper Towner got the mail contract, so the postoffice was moved the less-than-a-mile to Upper Town.

In the years that followed, this postoffice was moved probably more often than any postoffice in the West.

Location of the school really boomed the feud. Seems that Lower Towners decided the schoolhouse should be repaired, and they hired Tom Williams, local trapper, trader, guide, hunter and carpenter to do the work. Upper Towners weren't consulted, so they roared out in revolution and had the county superintendent condemn the schoolhouse. The battle was carried to the state supreme court, and Lower Town won the bout. Well, almost. Unhappy Upper Towners were bringing the school supplies back to the old schoolhouse when an amazing thing happened. The old building burst into flames, and no one was able to stop the fire. At least the Upper Towners weren't.

So back the school went to Upper Stanley, where it remains today, along with the United States postoffice.

Secret of Longevity

Speaking of old age always reminds a few Stanley residents of another old-timer who was approaching the century mark. A rather fussy, pious liquor salesman had just written a large order for "likker" for one of the bars, and was asked to have a drink. He piously declined, saying that liquor and tobacco took years off a man's life. The doors swung open about then, and in popped Mike, expertly hitting a spittoon with a stream of tobacco juice at a distance of ten feet. He hopped nimbly on a stool and ordered a double shot of whisky. The salesman watched disapprovingly, and the bartender, grinning, asked Mike if he knew just how old he figured he was.

"'Bout a hundred, I reckon," Mike replied, taking the whisky down in a half second and pushing the glass back for a refill.

"How come you lived so long?" prodded the barkeep.

"Hell, that's easy! Been drinking redeye and chawing tobaccy and having fun with pretty wimmen ever since I was but knee-high to a cougar!"

The salesman slipped quietly out of the bar.

A total of thirty-seven permanent residents was given for Stanley during the 1950 census. This does not worry the wilderness-loving people who call it, or the Basin, home. Each year more and more visitors discover the magnificent Sawtooth country, and some day a modern highway will find its way through the village. In a way, citizens feel this will be sad, for they've got something now that would be lost. They have a wilderness backyard, peaceful ranches, a few mines, wonderful hunting and fishing. And more important, they have a solitude and lack of fast living that is reflected in their faces and attitudes toward life and living in general.

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OKAY. LET'S GO
15 MINUTES LATER
LINE UP, FOLKS! THIS IS A HOLDUP! COVER THE DOOR, LEFTY!
I'M COVERING YOU, CLOWN! DROP THAT GUN!
WE'VE GOT THE OTHERS, LIEUTENANT. HERE ARE THE CLOTHES YOU LEFT OUTSIDE
GOOD! TAKE THIS BIRD ALONG. I'LL BE DOWN AFTER I CHANGE

BUT, DAD, HOW...?
LIEUTENANT ROGER'S STORY CAN WAIT 'TILL HE SHEDS THAT COSTUME. FOLLOW ME, "CAPTAIN KIDD"
HERE'S THE CURE FOR YOUR WHISKERS
THANKS, MR. DAVIES
WHAT A SWELL BLADE! TWO DAYS' STUBBLE GONE LIKE MAGIC!
THIN GILLETTES HAND OUT QUICK, EASY SHAVES EVERY TIME

I KNEW LEFTY WAS COMING AS "CAPTAIN KIDD", BUT I COULDN'T IDENTIFY HIS PAL, SO...
GREAT WORK!
JUST THE CHAP TO HEAD UP OUR ATOMIC SECURITY FORCE
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"Cast Your Bread..."

A Western Election Bet

IN READING the often gory history of Western gold-rush towns, one is likely to think that little occurred except hangings and killings. But this was not the case with Austin, Nevada. Here began the story of a sack of flour that traveled all over the West, and eventually represented $275,000 in gold dust!

Here, too, began one of the early battles between the Democratic and Republican parties—way back in 1864.

Reul Colt Gridley, a fiery-eyed Democrat and Southern sympathizer, made a little bet with one Dr. H. S. Herrick, a Republican and Union man, on the outcome of local elections. If the Democrats won, Herrick was to tote a sack of flour on his shoulder from the town of Clifton to Austin; if they lost, Gridley was to have the "honor." Gold-fevered citizens were reckless, but they did not toss money about recklessly on election bets, especially in view of the fact that often one party of the betting team might not live through the hail of bullets that sometimes peppered gold-rush towns.

The Republicans won and the town of Austin turned out to watch Gridley carry out his bargain, forsaking more violent pastimes for the moment. Dr. Herrick heaped shame on Gridley's shoulders by draping a Union flag across the flour as he and the newly elected officials escorted the downcast Democrat to the Bank Exchange Saloon in Austin.

A mob of highly amused citizens also accompanied the procession and the natural thing to do was to disperse into the Bank Exchange for a drink.

The drink did it—Gridley conceived his big idea. With a flourish of his drink, he commanded attention.

"Gentlemen, as you may know," he began, "Dr. Herrick and I had agreed to turn this sack of flour over to the U. S. Sanitary Commission for war relief. Now, I've got an idea. Why don't we auction this sack of flour off to the highest bidder? 'Member what the Good Book says about 'casting your bread . . . '? Well, this ain't bread yet, but it's sure stuff bread's made of." He waited until the crowd's laughter had subsided. "Anyway, I hear these poor Yanks are sure needing help, so the least we can do is try to show them our hearts are as big as the bellies of some our newly elected Republicans!"

"Two hundred in dust!" a voice bellowed from the crowd.

"Make it three hundred! Nothing cheap about me!"

"I say five hundred!" called another who had caught the fever.

The bidding became more and more reckless, so that by nightfall the U.S. Sanitary Commission, the predecessor of the Red Cross, was $10,000 richer! Aflame with firewater and righteous zeal, the city officials made the sack of flour the town's seal. Equally inflamed, Gridley let it be known that he had had a change of heart.

"Hereafter, I'm a Union man," he announced. "But still a damn good Democrat, mind you! I'm gonna see to it that my Yankee pals get a pile of money that will make the ten thousand we got look mighty sick. Me and this sack of flour is gonna travel!"

And travel they did, Gridley and the flour, all through Nevada, into California, other West Coast states, and eventually back East. At the end of the journey, the grimy sack of flour had brought in a grand total of $275,000!

Today, one may view this sack of flour in the Nevada State Historical Society's museum.

Loyal Democrats are prone to point out that even back in 1864 the party was full of surprises! —*William Carter*

SLICK EAR

A Novel by GIFF CHESHIRE

CHAPTER I

High Stakes

DUKE RAGLAN had known when he entered this game that he was grabbing the tiger's tail. Now he had to let it go, for the biggest game in Prineville's history was finished. It was going to be hard for him to leave. But he showed nervousness only at the tugged corners of a strong young mouth. He had faced this ticklish situation before.

He had been the big winner tonight, and the stakes had been high enough to hurt the losers, of whom there had been five. A man called Tewes, a rancher from up Crooked River, had banked. He was an aggressive, brawny fellow with a wry mouth and stormy eyes. He hadn't wanted to bank, but there was no way he could crawfish now. Tewes would have to cash the chips.

Duke fought vainly to keep hold of himself

Gambling was in his blood . . . but he left the green baize tables for a bigger game with lives of men and the happiness of women at stake

Though Duke had kept only a running count of his winnings, he figured they would amount to at least twenty thousand. It was beef money mainly, though the greasy tinhorn called Tagore had brought a stake into the game in hopes of making his own killing.

During the course of the night's playing, Tagore had brought forth every sharper's trick known to the profession of gambling. Duke Raglan had beat him with honest cards, the same way he had trimmed the other players..

The third man who showed open displeasure at the outcome of the contest was a fellow Duke knew all too well—Ernie Griffen, a professional gunman, a killer-for-hire. Duke had been surprised to find him in this high desert cowtown. He had no idea what Ernie was doing here beyond the fact that it wouldn't be anything good. Gambling was strictly a sideline with Ernie, and he never traveled for that purpose alone. But he had sat in and lost, and now he too was riled.

The covert antipathy was palpable to Duke. He had made his killing in good conscience, so that none of these men had a bone over which to pick the quarrel they so obviously wanted. They were searching now for some way to brace him, to expose him for a crook, to turn back the wheel of chance. But they weren't going to find that way.

Eddy Tagore, the tinhorn, mopped his forehead with a soiled handkerchief and put a pasty grin on his thin face. "Well," he said, "that winds up this session."

Duke gave him a blunt stare. "This session? Why talk like that? You're broke."

"Maybe," Tagore said, "I could raise another stake."

"We'll wait till you do," Duke said. He was anxious to leave, to get out through the door with what he had gained honestly.

THERE were two more men in the room. Neither had brought much money into the game, surviving through an even run of winning, losing, and winning again, resulting from first-rate poker sense. The hard night had taught Duke a lot of respect for both. Another, the kid called Frisco, looked too young and green even to be in the same room with a game as big as this had been. He had gone broke only a while ago and had stayed to watch the end. He was thick-set, a truculent-looking youngster. His grey eyes were amused and not unfriendly as they watched Duke now.

The remaining player had been introduced to Duke as Burt Imbler. He was somewhere near thirty, Duke judged, a laconic, easy-going fellow whose clothes were seedy. Yet he had played with a deadly intentness and at one point could have quit well ahead of the game had he chosen. Now he was cleaned out, and there was a stunned look in his face. He was like a man unbelievingly betrayed by luck or a trusted woman.

Milt Tews' eves were still narrowed in in-turned reflection. He hadn't asked for a return match yet, but this was what he appeared to be considering. Then he shook his head impatiently and said, "You going to cash your chips, Raglan?"

"I am," Duke said. "I got all the chips. It looks like I get all the money in the bank."

Tews shoved the money across the table. "You ain't what you look like, Raglan," he mused. "You got all the earmarks of Tagore, but you ain't his type of tinhorn."

"Now, wait a minute!" Tagore bristled, but he subsided under Tews' hard stare.

"Raglan, you fooled Tagore just like you done me," Tews resumed, as if trying to figure out what had happened. "Stovepipe hat and long-tail coat and shoes run over at the heel. A hungry, kind of eager look. Many a cowman plays poker good enough to skin the likes of Tagore. But you're different. You Fancy-Danned yourself up to fool us."

"Man's got a right to dress as he pleases," Duke said. "And sometimes he can't help looking hungry and eager."

"Well," Tews decided, "if you're still around tomorrow night, maybe we can have another go at it."

Duke shrugged, declining to commit

himself. He had picked his stovepipe hat off the floor and was carelessly stuffing his winnings into it, some gold, but most of it currency. In fact he was through with this town, and this whole wild strip of the eastern Oregon cattle range. Haste was rising in him, but he forced it down. Experience had long since taught him that some men played poker for the sheer love of the game, while others had less simple motives. Whatever had brought these men together in this bare and smoke-clouded hotel room, the drives in them had not been put down by the game's ending.

The kid called Frisco spoke up. "Where's your pard, tonight, Tagore?" he asked softly.

The tinhorn's whole scrawny body gave a small start. He stared at Frisco in fused anger and surprise. Then he shrugged coldly, making no reply.

His hat in the crook of his arm, Duke casually moved toward the door. No one else had risen from his place. Milt Tews poured himself whisky and sloshed it around in the glass, but he and Ernie Griffen were watching each other. One of Ernie's black eyebrows changed slightly, moved back into shape. With that small flexion something was conveyed to Tews. The cowman tossed off his drink. Still everybody sat there.

Duke Raglan was tall and lean and still in his middle twenties. His attire was as Tews had described it—a celluloid collar and flowing black tie, a seedy long coat, trousers with too loud a stripe under a checked waistcoat. Then came the give-away boots with their worn heels and patched soles. Yet his face was his most effective piece of professional equipment. It was open, genial, and could show a look of guileless, boyish excitement. It was a mobile face, capable of subtle deceptions.

"Good night, gents," Duke said, and walked through the door.

HE BLEW out his cheeks when he pulled the door shut behind him. His system had worked for him once again. Tews had been made to order for him, as had Tagore, for Duke had done all the things required to peg him as a tinhorn, hoping to get in a big game with a two-bit stake and parley it up. And through the first part of the night he had done as Frisco and Burt Imbler had done, managing merely to hang on. Then he had set to work and made monkeys out of Tews and Tagore and Ernie Griffen. By the time they realized that it wasn't luck but cold, ruthless and devilishly efficient poker, he had their chips.

Duke walked down the deeply shadowed hallway of the one-floored hotel. His own room was in the rear of the building, carefully chosen and obtained only because of a loud complaint to the manager that he was so light a sleeper that street noise disturbed his rest.

Fishing the key from his pocket, he unlocked the door and stepped in only when the door had completed its swing and bumped against the wall. He had left his lamp burning in hopes that he would be returning in this wise, with a literal hatful of cash. From habit he quickly glanced at the four corners of the room and at the darkened slit under the near edge of the lumpy bed. Then he shut the door and turned the key again.

The money-belt he took from his valise was commodious, but for a long while had been too thin for Duke's comfort. Now, with the swift methodicalness of a bank teller, he began to sort the currency by denominations. Finished, he stowed it

away in the belt's compartments, a glimmer in his eye. Then he counted the gold, dropped it into a long leather pouch, then buried the pouch under the change of clothing in his valise.

His eyes were gleaming. He was almost twenty-two thousand richer than he had been when he had arrived in this town the previous afternoon. If he hurried, he would be away from here before another dawn, taking with him a considerable chunk of the locality's beef income.

He had a saddle-roll under the bed and a pair of saddle-bags. He bent and pulled out the sling. In it was range garb, the clothes of a plain cowpuncher. When he had changed he would look like any buckaroo in the country, with the right to look so. He had punched a lot of cows before his card skill had become an obsession, almost a disease with him.

Duke had just started to untie his roll when a knock made a low summons on his door. He didn't want company, yet he dared not ignore the knock, if he wanted to slip out of this town undetected, presently. He kicked his roll back under the bed, walked boldly to the door, twisted the key and opened up.

His eyes, expecting to see the face of some quarrelsome man who had lost in the game, widened in quick surprise. But the girl looking at him with a half-smile showed no surprise.

"Hello, Duke," she said. "Aren't you going to ask me in?"

"Belle!" he breathed. "What are you doing in this man's town?"

The girl—her name was Belle Lyons—smiled and stepped forward, forcing him to stand back and let her come in. She was slender, with a face of delicate, almost exotic beauty, and her hair was the color of dark honey. Her eyes, which had been deep brown pools of mystery to him back when he had known her well, had amusement in them, had warmth and a clarity most men would find disconcerting.

"I'm not doing as well as you, from what I hear," said Belle. "When Frisco came out for a drink at three o'clock he said you were high man on the totem pole. I knew you would be. The same old Duke, aren't you?"

"You knew I was here," Duke asked.

SHE nodded. "I work in the High Desert. I saw you having a drink at the bar."

"I never seen you," Duke said.

"I bobbed my head. I know why you were here, and I didn't want anybody to realize we were acquainted. I expect to stay, and I don't care to be skinned for not sounding the warning against you."

"Ernie Griffen's here, too," Duke said.

"That's right," Belle agreed.

"Is that why you're here?"

"Is it?" Belle echoed him, slight laugh in her husky voice. "I've got a room here, Duke. I wanted to say hello, so I waited up."

"Thanks for not spoiling the set-up for me," Duke said. "And thanks in advance for letting me get out of this town before daylight."

Belle laughed. "All right, Duke. I know you're in a hurry, and I'll get the devil out. I hope we meet again."

CHAPTER II

For Old Time's Sake

DUKE RAGLAN wondered if Belle really had waited up through most of the night just to say hello to him. Still, they had been good friends in Miles City, then trouble had come into Belle's life and he had moved on before he had learned the outcome. Ernie Griffen had been involved in that trouble, and a girl named Hilda, who was Belle's kid sister. Now Ernie was here in Pineville in the eastern Oregon country, and Belle was here. And so was something deeper than Duke could understand.

"No, we'll not meet here again," Belle told him. "You'd be a dead man if you

stayed here too long. You know about Ernie? He's gone to work for Milt Tews. You didn't break Tews tonight. He's already well-heeled enough to suit most people, but ambitious. What Tews won't like is that he let himself be suckered by a wolf that looks like a lamb. Then there's Eddie Tagore. He's a cheap tinhorn but deadly, and I've got an idea you broke him flat. He'd like to have your money, but he wouldn't risk playing for it again."

"Since I don't mean to stay," Duke said, "it don't matter."

"But again it might," Belle said promptly. "Tagore's got a partner. Dim-witted, but strong. I figured you needed to be warned that there's a man you don't know about."

"Why, thanks, Belle," Duke said warmly. He remembered now that the kid Frisco had asked Tagore about his teammate and had drawn a hard look from the tinhorn. So that was what Belle had waited up all night for. Looking at her closely, Duke said, "If there's anything I can do to help you, girl, I wish you'd tell me."

"I don't need money, Duke," she said. "You know I make out well enough, myself."

"Want me to kill Ernie for you?"

"Thank you, I'll do that for myself, too."

"Who followed who here?"

"Ernie got here first."

Duke wanted to know about Hilda but dared not ask, and apparently Belle wasn't going to mention her sister voluntarily. Hilda's baby would have been born long since. Maybe Hilda had died and the baby, too. Circumstances had required Duke Raglan to leave Miles City right in the heat of that trouble. But he had known Belle well, and knew that she meant what she said. If she was here to kill Ernie, she *would* do the job herself. That was the way Belle Lyons was cut out.

Then Belle held out her hand. "So long, Duke. And good luck."

"Luck, Belle," he said, taking the hand. It was warm and strong, and he knew that both her hands held tenderness in certain moods.

He didn't say a word about her situation here, for she had always seemed wiser than he, and did not need his advice. He watched her slip through the door and pull it shut behind her.

Duke stood there for a long moment, feeling a sudden reluctance to leave this town so soon. He hadn't wanted to leave Belle there in Miles City, because she had something for him that he couldn't quite name. That something was in the golden voice with which she earned her living in frontier saloons, and the tenderness of her hands and the depths of her eyes. Yes, and in the fact that she had never tried to conceal her liking for Duke Raglan.

Somebody else was coming along the hallway, this time with a heavier, wider stepping tread. Duke hadn't relocked the door, and his hand slid in toward the gun in his shoulder holster as he watched the knob turn and the door swing in. Then Ernie Griffen stepped through, his face expressionless, and softly closed the door behind him.

"Howdy, Duke," Ernie said. "I couldn't really say howdy in the game."

"Been wondering why you didn't spoil it," Duke murmured. "Why didn't you, Ernie? You lost pretty heavy, so I guess you want it back."

Ernie bobbed his head. "That's right, Duke. I want it back."

"I guess you've got it coming," Duke said with a sigh. "What you lost. But that's all."

"Huh-uh," Ernie said. "I want an even split on the works, Duke. That's why I kept still."

HE WAS a big man, wearing a black broadcloth suit, the coat of which was bulged at the shoulders. He had one thing in common with Duke Raglan; his face belied the kind of man he was. Ernie's face was open, healthily weathered, and his gray eyes completely masked the murkiness of their inner vision. Ernie was a man who attracted women and inspired trust, but this was a secondary pursuit of Ernie's—between killing and gambling.

"Hear you're working for Milt Tews,"

Duke said. "Who's he gunning for?"

Ernie's eyes narrowed. "So you seen Belle."

"Know who she's gunning for?" Duke asked.

"Me, I reckon. But about Tews—I'm his ramrod, Duke. And it ain't good politics to take a chunk of *dinero* off your own boss. So I let you take my piece away from Milt, Duke."

"It's a wonder you never bit off your ma's breast, man."

"Maybe I did. Let's cut the melon, if you mean to get away from here before morning."

A man didn't laugh at a proved killer; he didn't do anything as flashily foolish as to try to beat him to the draw or throw pepper in his eyes then hammer him senseless. But Duke had won every cent of his new wealth with honest cards, even what Ernie had lost. He hated to give any of it up and felt that he was a mite smarter than Ernie.

Duke said, "Ernie, it's in my money-belt. If you took it off me, it'd give me a good chance to jump you. If I take it off, it'll give me a chance to reach the gun I've got under my pants band. I'm just warning you. Which'll it be?"

"I'll get that money-belt," Ernie said. "Turn around, Duke."

Duke turned, and heard Ernie move in behind him. The belt buckled in front, so that Ernie would have to reach around him with both hands. Duke was grinning a little, looking at the thing the way he would examine a fresh hand of cards. He knew Ernie would try to latch onto all the money. And this was Ernie's chance.

Duke whirled just as Ernie had lifted up the gun he had silently drawn to use as a knockout weapon. The gun was otherwise useless in that position, and Duke struck out with a swift and vicious punch. If it occurred to Ernie to yell and sound an alarm, he didn't have time to do it.

Duke's fist smashed against his mouth, driving Ernie's head back with a snap, and Duke was still cool enough to catch the man and soften his fall to the floor. Then Duke wrested the gun from loosened fingers and did to Ernie's head what Ernie had hoped to do to his. Ernie grunted as the gun whacked, and after that his big body was still.

Now Duke worked hastily, changing to his range clothes. He put away the little shoulder gun and harness and strapped the shell-belt he took from his valise about his middle, the .45 riding on his hip where an honest man ought to wear it. He hung his sling across the back of his shoulders, the saddle-bags over the left shoulder, and picked up the valise in his right hand. No sound came from the outer areas now. The hotel had quieted down completely.

There was the twist of a smile on Duke's lips. He blew out the lamp, then slipped quietly through the doorway and turned toward the hotel's back door. Before he walked out into the night he paused for a backward sweep of attention. Reassured, he stepped out into the space behind the hotel and into a shower of rain. He had left a horse concealed beyond the edge of the town and was praying now that no one had discovered it, that it was still there.

The alley slanted down toward the closest street. Duke tramped silently down it and was nearly out of the slot when he wheeled suddenly and by reflex slammed out with the heavy valise. The kindling response to this challenge was like his reaction to Ernie Griffen's effort. Duke's ears had sorted something from the rain's patter, his quick memory recalling Eddy Tagore's partner, against whom he had twice been warned. The man had stepped from the brush, close on Duke's right, and swung up a clubbed gun. The valise, heavy with the gold coin and shoulder gun, knocked him back.

DUKE pulled his own Colt, aware that the brush had held the man upright and had given him a spring back toward his victim. The footpad kicked the valise aside, to be retrieved later, perhaps believing that it held the whole of the night's winnings. He had shifted the gun to the other hand, meaning to shoot with it. He had hoped for a quiet, easy job but would kill and ride for stakes like those involved

here. Duke, knowing that his own life hung by a thread, triggered.

But in the same instant the other man's gun blazed just in front of him. Duke knew a moment in which he struggled vainly to keep hold of himself. But he was hit, blown to pieces, and the wet earth beneath his feet was going it like a bronco.

For what seemed an eternity, after that, he almost came back to consciousness time after time only to have it slip out of his grasp again. But with each near clearing of his senses he gathered an impression which, in the loggy depths of half reality, he tried to make into an intelligible pattern.

Finally he got the idea that he was roped aboard a horse, forking the saddle and canted forward onto the horse's neck, so that his aching head bobbed frightfully. He found this interesting despite the pain. It had never occurred to him that a man might make the crossing to the next world on horseback. He liked the arrangement.

Old cowhands, he decided, must be assigned the job of meeting such new arrivals as appeared from the cattle ranges. Knowing they were as apt as not to be shot up, horses and lash rope were fetched along. Duke even got to wondering if they ever held roundup in the afterland or had a bucking contest. Wings would help a man on a mustang as rough as the one under him right now.

Again he was rational enough to realize that it was still raining, that someone was riding ahead of him and leading this horse. Once a man's voice murmured, "All right, Raglan, take it easy. If you're as tough as you are smart, you'll be all right."

There was something vaguely familiar about that voice. It was genial, casual, effortless. Not one that he knew well or had heard often, yet not the voice of a total stranger, either.

Duke was wondering about that when he drifted off into unconsciousness once more. . . .

At last Duke Raglan opened his eyes, to discover that he was in bed, with daylight filling the room about him. Rain still fell, slashing against a clean window with real curtains, and this served to remind him of a giddy horseback ride and the flaming gun in the Prineville alley. Nor was it the clean, washed air accompanying rain that he found so pleasant to his nostrils. It was perfume that made this room so vaguely but delightfully fragrant.

It was a woman's room. Again Duke drifted off, remembering women—his mother, his sister, Belle Lyons. But this wasn't Belle's room; she lived at the hotel where the game had been. Miles from here. Over a lot of rough, upside-down trail. Duke's languor was now relaxed and restful; presently full sleep came.

He didn't know it until he opened his eyes again, but it was somebody coming into the room that finally awakened him. The thoughts that had been in his mind when he dropped off made it seem quite proper for a girl to be standing there looking at him. But there was a mild surprise in the kind of girl he saw. She was motionless, as if she had tried to come in for something without awakening him, and was annoyed with herself that she had.

"Think nothing of it," Duke muttered. "I ought to have got up hours ago."

CHAPTER III

Nester Land

THE girl smiled, but it was not quite a friendly smile. Her dress of calico, like that worn by most of the poorer range women, was plain, but it was cut expertly to fit her slender figure. Her hair was sable black, sort of curly; her nose was small and straight, and her brows arched cleanly above large brown eyes.

"You're a sleepy-head," she told Duke.

"Who tied me on that horse last night?" he mumbled. "And where am I?"

"It wasn't last night," the girl said.

"Feel your whiskers if you think so."

The whiskers were there, all right, long enough to evoke a grunt of surprise from Duke as he ran his palm over his cheek. His head was bandaged.

"Don't feel so proud of yourself," the girl said. "It took you five days to grow them. My brother brought you home the night he found you. The doctor's been here twice since. The first time he sewed up the gash on your head and said you had a deep concussion. The second time he said if you were onery enough to last that long, you'd probably pull through. Asked me to give you some broth as soon as you came to."

"Who," Duke insisted, "is your brother, if you don't care to tell me who you are?"

"He was in that big game when you won everything, Duke Raglan. Burt Imbler, if you remember. My name is Laury. Burt and Frisco knew you were a dead duck if somebody didn't watch out for you. Frisco watched Milt Tews. Burt watched to see when you slipped out of the hotel because they figured you'd light a shuck. He couldn't stop what happened to you in the alley, but you killed the man who held you up there. Burt got you away fast. Later he explained it to the sheriff, and you're in the clear. That partner of Tagore's was an odious character."

"So this is Burt Imbler's place," Duke said musingly.

"If he's able to hold onto it," the girl said sharply. "I'd better feed you, I guess."

"If my clothes are handy," Duke said, "I'll get dressed."

"Go ahead and try it," said Laury Imbler, and went out.

Duke tried, but could barely get his head off the pillow. Even that small effort tired him. He rested again, sorting out the contents of a scrambled mind. It had been his intention to strike for the pass in the Cascades and cross to the Willamette valley. In Albany, he had heard, he could catch a steamboat to Portland or else take a stage to San Francisco. With a stake like he had now—

Duke batted his eyes. Where was it? It was no longer strapped about his middle. Duke rolled his head but could see neither clothes nor valise nor roll in the room.

Laury came back bearing a tray and a bowl of something so fragrant that appetite sprang alive in Duke. She helped him prop himself up in the bed, showing a surprising strength in her pretty brown arms, a deft, gentle swiftness of hands.

"Where's Burt?" Duke asked.

She stepped away and again showed him a faint but unmistakable hostility. She was a girl of contrasts, he thought, of quick friendliness and quick annoyance, of daintiness and yet of work-roughened hands. There was warmth in her, he divined, yet a man would draw off a lot of coolness before he tapped it.

"Burt'll be back," she said, and left Duke.

He drank all the broth. Laury was a long while returning to pick up the tray. When she came finally he lacked the courage to ask her what had happened to his money. It would sound suspicious, and he knew she wouldn't steal it.

The broth was warm and comfortable in his stomach, and Duke found himself growing drowsy again.

WHEN he opened his eyes another time, it was with the old, familiar feeling of well-being. He realized that a night must have passed because a new dawn was just breaking. He was able to roll over and swing his legs out of bed. When he came to a stand he felt groggy, but not enough so but what he knew he could make it. The trouble was, he was in his underwear and couldn't see the rest of his clothes anywhere.

Then he looked under the bed, and there were his valise, roll and saddle-bags. He dropped to his knees. Presently he knew that the money-belt had been placed in the valise. Every cent he had brought out of the game was there, and the gold was also accounted for.

He had abandoned his tinhorn rig in the hotel, and the rough clothing he had worn when hurt, he found, had been

Tagore pitched forward and fell down the rock

washed, mended and ironed and was neatly folded and packed in the valise. Duke dressed, feeling stronger by the minute. As he fished out his razor he discovered that the bedroom he occupied opened directly off the kitchen. That was also cold, for a morning fire had not yet been built in the range.

The whole place was small, shacky. Duke went out to the back porch, tipped water out of a bucket into a wash pan, then washed up. After that he lathered the heavy black stubble on his face and shaved.

He still was the only one up when he came back into the kitchen. He laid a fire in the stove and set a match to it. Peeling back the curtains on a set of wall shelves, he saw everything he needed to get breakfast. He put coffee on to cook, then a skillet, and began to mix hotcake batter.

"Good gravy!" a nice voice said, beyond the curtain to another room. "It's the first time I ever woke up to the smell of breakfast cooking. But you won't get out of disgrace that easy, Burt Imbler."

There was a scuffing, padding sound, and the doorway curtain was peeled back. Laury stood there in a nightgown, her dark hair tousled, firm breasts nicely lifting the cloth. She squealed and dropped the curtain.

"Duke Raglan!" she stormed. "What are you doing out of bed?"

"Man gets hungry," Duke said. "Put on a few duds and we'll eat."

Burt Imbler appeared first, descending a ladder from the loft of the small shack. He gave Duke a quick stare, then grinned. "Raglan, you're a hard man to down," he said. "And a harder one to keep down."

"Let's eat," Duke said.

Laury emerged. Standing up, Duke saw that the top of her black head would no more than touch his chin, should they measure. Though he found that prospect appealing, he doubted that Laury would stand for it for she had turned cool, maybe miffed because he had let her come upon him in her night dress. But she ate the flapjacks he had cooked as if she found them good, and she drank his coffee.

"You run steers?" Duke asked Burt.

Burt looked at him for a long moment, then said, "We're nesters, Raglan. Some don't like us. If you don't, you can go to hell."

"I don't like nesters," Duke admitted. "But I like Imblers. That was a stiff game you got into, Burt. You done all right with the stake you had, but how come?"

"He did all right, did he?" Laury said fiercely. "He gambled away every cent we had, Duke Raglan!"

Duke grinned. "I was speaking of his card sense, ma'am. Bought a hundred-dollar stack and made it last most of the night."

"He ended up broke, didn't he?" Laury demanded.

So it was Burt's gambling she resented and not his having brought home a shot-up stranger for her to nurse. Everything about this place attested her claim that Burt had entered that game on sorely needed money. Thinking back, Duke recalled the man's intentness all through the night, his own feeling that Burt was making a desperate play for something more than a night's excitement.

FINISHED eating, Burt shoved back his chair and said, "Well, I've got to go over to Cull Haven this morning."

"Cull Haven?" Duke said.

Burt grinned. "That's what they call the C H outfit. It belongs to Ma Hopgood. She's got a big wing, Ma has. There ain't a sorry critter of any kind hits this country but it winds up at Ma's. Cats, dogs and humans. One of the toughest old turkeys alive, Ma is. She never got married. The C comes from her first name, which is Cecilia. You ought to know her, Duke. Want to come along?"

"He does not!" Laury said. "After having nursed a man this far, I don't aim to have him fall over dead. He's going to take it easy."

"Maybe I better mind her," Duke suggested.

It was another week before Duke Raglan found himself as strong as he pretended to be. But he kept up and about, learning several things that interested him. He found also that the sizable nester colony formed here between the southern affluents of the Crooked and the high desert was not comprised of the hopeless breed of dry dirt farmers so frequently and so often tragically dotting the cattle ranges.

The dryness of this country had precluded that type of agriculture. So all through this region the nester breed, farmers from back East, was trying to get going with cattle.

The greasy-sackers, the two-bitters, who were as much anathema to the large cattle outfits as dirt farmers, cut the range into small holdings. They overstocked and didn't know their business, and generally got in the way. Squatters, intruders—a class to be held in contempt. Milt Tews' big Tack outfit lay west of it. According to Burt, nobody hated a nester worse than did Tews.

"But you two sat in the same game," Duke said.

Burt grinned. "Tews didn't mind. He figured I'd go broke and have to quit my claim finally. And I did go broke, and now he figures I'll have to quit."

"Will you?"

Burt shrugged.

The days did nothing to erase the trace of hostility in Laury. The fall rain had

stopped, a welcome warmth of Indian summer following. Presently Duke could stick a saddle. He knew that the Imblers still considered him to be nothing but a tinhorn. He did not try to correct the impression, and refrained from revealing the fact that he knew more about the cattle business than they did.

So, as he rode about with Burt, he let the nester explain things. It was a sorry little outfit they possessed, Duke saw, but Burt was proud of it. He and Laury had been here three years, Burt said. They had accumulated around fifty head of shestock, and for some reason had experienced trouble in keeping possession of a bull by which the herd could multiply.

"They get shot or locoed or poisoned every trip," Burt said. "I've kept going by working for Ma Hopgood. But it's come to a place where I've got to fish or cut bait, Duke. Had money for a good bull when I went into that game. We still ain't got no bull."

"Why'd you take such a long chance, Burt?" Duke asked.

"I kind of got a everything-or-nothing streak of craziness," Burt admitted. "Couldn't use two bulls right now, but I could of used one bull and some other fixings. One thing, I'd like to see Laury dressed better and her house fixed up. So I plunged."

"When you helped me out of that mess in Prineville," Duke said, "was it with the idea I might reward you?"

Burt's flat, harsh stare was answer enough.

"Take it easy," Duke resumed. "I didn't think so, Burt. I haven't wanted to insult you by offering you your money back. How about a loan?"

"Hell," Burt said, "even if you could sell me the notion, we'd never get it past Laury."

DUKE laughed. This was his kind of hombre. "I can put two and two together," he commented. "Milt Tews don't like a big nester colony sitting almost on top of him. I take it he's trying to run some of you off. You, at least."

"He's playing for the whole kitty," Burt answered.

"You realize," Duke said, "that Tews' man Ernie is a professional killer?"

Burt blinked. "I realized he's skunk-striped. But I didn't know that."

"So Tews' playing is apt to get rougher," Duke said.

"That could be." Burt looked worried. "And here's something for you to think about. Your being at our place ain't healthy for you, welcome though you are. Let Tews get the idea you're backing me with *dinero,* and he'll be after you."

"I wouldn't want to turn my back on either him or Ernie," Duke drawled. "Nor on Eddie Tagore."

CHAPTER IV

Tinhorn's Challenge

RAGLAN rode a couple of times with Laury, but he failed to strike up the same easy friendship with her that he had with her brother. There was a hard core in the girl whose life, Duke realized, had not been easy. She had been shocked and disappointed by the money Burt had lost across the card table. So Duke tried something on her he had pulled on Burt.

"Some debts a man can't pay with money," he told Laury one day. "But I'm mighty grateful to you and Burt. I feel all-fired guilty with money he lost and couldn't afford. Know it would rile him if I offered to make it good. But if you and I could work up a little deal just between ourselves—"

"You can stop right there," Laury said. "Burt lost that money, and that isn't what I hold against you, Duke Raglan. I just don't like a man of your cut. I've always had to help pay for Burt's recklessness. And you make chance-taking your whole work."

"If I make it pay," Duke said, "what's wrong with it?"

"I've got the strange idea people have to earn what they get," Laury snapped. "That is, if it's to mean anything to them. Burt's bad enough. He'll work his head off for money, then gamble with it. I take it you don't even work."

He had asked for it, but that stung. "Well," Duke said stiffly, "if I can buy a horse from Burt, I can take off over the mountains any time now. Tomorrow."

Laury said nothing in objection to that.

After supper, that evening, Burt saddled and rode off by himself. He didn't invite Duke along nor did he explain his intentions. But Duke had bought a good horse from him that day and announced his intentions of heading for the Cascades pass at daybreak.

Duke hoped Burt wouldn't be fool enough to gamble the money received for the horse in hopes of retrieving the lost hundred dollars. With Burt such wildness looked idiotic and Duke saw that the way Laury did. So maybe there was some basis for her opinion of Duke Raglan.

Duke found himself enjoying his last evening with Laury. The autumn nights were cold enough so that a fire in the stove was pleasant. They sat in the small, clean kitchen on either side of the table. Laury was sewing, and the quiet wrought in Duke a contentment such as he could not remember having experienced before. It was blamed near domestic. A couple of times he caught Laury studying him covertly, but she let nothing show on her face to indicate what she was wondering or thinking about him.

Finally she asked, "What do you hunt for in your travels, Duke?"

He grinned. "One thing and then another."

"Do you find it?"

"One way or another," he said.

"A woman or a bottle or a game," Laury murmured.

"Worth looking for," Duke said.

"Maybe what you want isn't in a place, Duke. Maybe it's in a way of life."

"Like cow punching?" Duke snorted.

"In hard work and trouble," Laury snapped. "In working for something with everything you've got. But never mind, Duke. I'd get as far talking Greek with a Chinese."

She was sure headstrong, Duke reflected. Yet he had to admire the fact that she was clear and firm in her opinions. Presently he bade her good night and went to bed. He was anxious to be off at dawn, yet he hated to go and leave the Imblers the way they were situated. He would leave money where it could be found after he was gone too far for them to return it. Surely they would be sensible enough to make use of it.

Burt was at breakfast with Laury when Duke appeared the next morning. Kept awake in the first hours by his moody thoughts, Duke had overslept. Burt hadn't yet come in when Duke finally fell asleep, and now the nester looked tired. But he also looked cheerful, so if he had gone to town to gamble the horse money, he had had luck.

BURT nodded a good morning as he grinned at Duke. "If you go this morning," Burt said, "you're running."

"How come?" Duke demanded.

"Eddy Tagore has advertised his intentions of killing you on sight. I was at Binn's roadhouse last night, and I heard that. But forget I told you, if you want."

Duke gave Burt a look half of amazement, the rest of annoyance. If that was what had cheered Burt up, it meant Burt wanted to hold him here. "Then I got to go to town before I leave," Duke said.

"Eddy took it hard about you killing his pardner," Burt said. "That breed can get sentimental. The boys say Eddy went plumb off the track. I wouldn't pay any attention to his talk, though. Nobody knows you heard of it, anyhow. Go on and clear out." He helped himself to another flapjack. "And don't go hunting for a crazy man like Eddy. When he comes to his senses he'll drop it like a hot potato."

Duke Raglan had pulled some fairly clever capers, himself. But what Burt had done beat them all. Burt had nailed his

feet to the floor, for Duke wasn't cut out so he could quit a country where some man had advertised a lethal hatred of him. But he couldn't seek Tagore and get it over with as long as there was reason to assume that the man was temporarily unbalanced by the death of his friend.

"Eat your breakfast," Laury said, with a faint smile. "You've got a long ride ahead of you, you know."

"I reckon not today," Duke snapped. He was angered but caught.

"Well," Burt said innocently, "you're welcome to stay as long as you want."

"Could I pay board?" Duke asked.

Burt's eyes clouded. "We don't keep boarders."

"Then I'd better move to town," Duke said.

Clearly Burt hadn't anticipated that. He looked startled, concerned. "Going to give the tinhorn his chance?"

"I'm not going to hide."

Duke supposed he had expected Laury to protest, but she didn't do it. Her indifference angered him more than had her previous show of triumph. And it left Duke caught flat-footed. But he made himself be pleasant and ate his breakfast.

Afterward he saddled his new horse and thonged his gear to the saddle. Burt didn't repeat his invitation to stay, and Laury didn't extend one. Duke thanked them sincerely for their favors and rode out, heading for Prineville. Recklessness was riding with him by then. If Eddy Tagore wanted to crowd a showdown, Duke was ready any time.

He came to the road that led to the Crooked, then on to the town of Prineville that was the center of this vast cattle range. As he neared the road, dust twisting up down its southern reach caught his attention. It was a buckboard rattling along at considerable speed. It was traveling faster than Duke intended to go, so he slowed his horse to let the buckboard pass on ahead, not wanting to eat its dust. But he had reached the road, waiting for it to pass, when the rig rolled up to him and stopped.

Frisco was driving the buckboard—the kid who had been in the big game. But he only tipped Duke a vague and casual nod. Duke wasn't paying much attention to Frisco, but to the woman on the other side of the seat who filled three-quarters of it, pinching the kid against the arm rest on his side. The woman wore a small round hat pinned precisely atop a gray and leonine head. She wore a coat and her arms in the sleeves looked like bursting sausages. Her seamy brown face had a quality in it that was shaded by bulldogs.

"Howdy," she said. "You that Duke Raglan?"

Duke touched his hat.

"Heard about you," said the woman. "You cleaned Frisco, and I fanned his tail feathers when he got home."

"He'll learn, ma'am," Duke said.

"Frisco will? Hah."

FRISCO fidgeted uneasily, though the woman's voice was not unkind.

Then she resumed, "I'm Ma Hopgood. Been hearing about you from Burt Imbler. Looks like you're pulling stakes. You going to town?"

"That's right," Duke admitted. Burt had said this Cecilia Hopgood of Cull Haven had never married, so she probably was not Frisco's mother.

"Can you drive a team?" she asked.

"I can make a fair show of it, ma'am."

"Then," said Ma Hopgood, "you swap places with him, Frisco. I want to talk to this man."

Frisco swung down, as if taking it for granted that Duke would accede to Ma's demand. Frisco was quick, though stocky, and his face was a little wizened. His eyes were cool and oddly wise, yet Duke thought that they were not bad eyes. With a grin Duke swung out of saddle and turned his mount over to the kid. Swinging into the buckboard he picked up the ribbons and the rig rattled on, Frisco waiting as Duke had intended doing for the dust to clear out.

"So," Ma said to Duke, "you're quitting the country to resume your iniquitous life."

"My iniquities," Duke answered, "are

my own business."

"That's a shame," Ma said. "I wanted to hear 'em. But I was wondering why you can't resume 'em just as well here. We got sin aplenty for any man, with some left over for the women. Duke, you're a slick ear, the same as Frisco was when he hit this country. Wild-eyed and itchy-footed and due for a bullet ticket to Boot Hill. I pegged Frisco down, and now he's my ramrod. If my luck holds he'll be a married man before long, too."

"That kid your ramrod?" Duke said, surprised.

"He's twenty-two in years. About twice that in his head. The point is, I've made up my mind to nail you down, too, Duke. Maybe get you married. I like what Burt's told me, and some other things I've heard."

"Don't waste your nail, Ma," Duke said. "Maybe I was born backwards, but I got to get my settling down over first. I'm ready to fiddlefoot from here on. My old man—well, never mind about that. What did you figure to nail me to—that Cull Haven of yours?"

Ma shook her head. "I need a man to do a job I think you could do. I got a line camp I don't own. I'd like to get it homesteaded, but it would take a first rate fighting man to cut it. All the nesters I know have already used their homestead rights. I need Frisco where he is. My other riders are either too old or too infirm to stick against Milt Tews and that tough new foreman Milt got hold of."

"Tews again," Duke said. "He trying to latch onto your line camp."

"He sure is," Ma said. "But if somebody had an outright claim to it he'd be stopped. I know you don't need money, Duke. And that you don't like to work for the stuff. But I had a notion you might like to homestead that piece. As a favor, not only to me, but to Burt and Laury Imbler."

Duke swung her a sharp stare. "How'd it help them?"

"This piece," Ma said, "lays square in Tews' path in his intention to crowd up through the nester colony. It'd be a buffer with the right man there. Milt Tews could be halted in his tracks before he even gets started. But I see you're still a slick ear. I ain't the woman who'll put a brand on you."

Duke was scowling. He surely wanted to repay the Imblers for their many kindnesses to him. But he knew something about homesteading, too. For one thing, it tied a man down for a long, long time. Guardedly he said,, "Where is this piece?"

"It don't matter," Ma said. "But there's already a cabin there and some corrals and a barn. The camp lays between Tews' east boundary and the nester colony, and Cull Haven's south of there. Plenty water, and a pretty place. All a man'd have to do is move in. If it was the right man and he liked it well enough, I'd relinquish what little claim I got to it."

"I'm a gambler," Duke said. "I make my living at poker."

"You never fooled Frisco," Ma snorted, "and you ain't fooling me. Where was this cattle outfit you grew up on, where your old man worked you too hard and tied you down so that you finally turned bronco?"

"Where'd you get that, Ma?" Duke asked, surprised.

"It's an old story, son," Ma said, and chuckled.

CHAPTER V

Facing Up to It

AS THEY LAPSED into silence, Duke was glad that Ma wasn't going to press the matter she had proposed. Duke was not unmindful of the fact that Frisco, somewhere back past the dust, was riding along with better than twenty thousand of Duke's money. But Duke wasn't worried about it.

The faint uneasiness in him came from the fact that he was turning down a chance to repay the Imblers, which sort of stank, considering how he had hunted for a way to do that. He was willing to pay for his

favors with cash, it looked like, but wasn't willing to work for them. Laury had claimed that, then had given it up. She had said it was like talking Greek to a Chinese.

The road joined the main river road presently, and thereafter the rounded hills with their connecting flatlands fell away, the road following the narrow gorge with its staggering precipices. The Crooked was not in itself a particularly violent stream. Its torn and broken cleft had resulted from primeval glacial floods. The buckboard followed this declivity for better than an hour, rolling right along, then finally came to another intersection where Ma Hopgood pointed south.

"That's another road to Milt Tews' Tack," she said. "My line camp is east of his layout. But a man taking a look at it ought to avoid the Tack. There's a rule at the land office against a dead man filing a claim. Land office is in Lakeview. That's quite a ride on south. But how I do rattle on, Duke. I'm just a gabby old woman."

They reached Prineville just before noon. Young, raw and wild as the town was, Duke had liked it on his first visit. It lay on a wheeling flat where the river escaped the jaws of its deep canyon. Eastward the purpled Ochocos lifted against the autumn sky. On the south strangely formed rims stood at intervals like truncated fingers. On the west a high butte rose to blot out the distant, snowcapped Cascades.

Duke left Ma Hopgood at the edge of town and took his horse from Frisco. The kid gave him a grin but was silent, so Duke said, "Thanks for tipping me off the other night about Tagore's pard. I didn't quite get the idea then, but it put me on guard."

Frisco eyed the bandage that still showed under Duke's hat. "Back to give 'em another crack at you?"

"If anybody wants another." Leading his horse, Duke walked on into town.

He was restless and uncertain. It wasn't anxiety rendered by the obvious danger for him in this town. It wasn't that, as far as he knew, he would never see Burt and Laury Imbler again. It wasn't anything that he could put a finger on, but the kind of deep bewilderment that can sometimes oppress a man. Nag at him, obsess him, and yet never yield to his probing.

Duke decided, as he left his horse at the livery barn, that Ma Hopgood had got under his hide when she called him a slick ear. Nobody had yet or ever would brand Duke Raglan—that was true. But a slick ear was a calf, immature. And Ma, on the other hand, had made that twenty-two year old kid her ramrod.

That, and what Laury had said about Duke Raglan not wanting to work for his gains, got to him. The hell with them, then—they were only a couple of women, anyhow. Women were different. They were born soft and sentimental and idealistic. Or else they were no good at all.

Duke took his valise to the hotel and registered for a room. There was none of the old build-up by which he usually entered a town. He was wearing range garb, looking what he was—a cowhand by upbringing. He gave no thought to quick escape this time, and took the room the desk clerk gave him.

There, when he scrubbed the trail dust away and brushed his clothes, he felt generally restless and at a loose end. He knew he was enough talked about in this town that already he had excited a new outburst of interest. Eddy Tagore was apt to make trouble, if Tagore really had the stomach for it. But that undoubted menace wasn't what had got into Duke Raglan, either.

HE THOUGHT of one thing that might help him get rid of this mood—a talk with Belle Lyons. She was a woman, but a kind of in-between woman. She had told him hello and farewell, and he wondered how it would affect her to learn that he hadn't yet left the country. Belle wouldn't be at work at the High Desert for hours yet. But she had a room in this hotel, he remembered. Duke descended the stairs to the desk.

"Belle Lyons?" the clerk repeated. "She moved out."

"Oh," Duke said. He was disappointed. "Well, thanks."

Belle was his kind of person, all right. Belle had never tried to reform him. She took things as they were and as they came and kept her hands off other people. The clerk didn't look inclined to volunteer any more information about her, and Duke didn't want to press it. He went out to the street.

He had his dinner. The town was wholly peaceful, not half as electrified by the reappearance of Duke Raglan as he had expected. Ma Hopgood's buckboard was still racked in front of the mercantile. Frisco stood at the hitch-bar talking to some bowlegged puncher in a high hat and levis. Duke crossed over to the other walk before he caught their attention.

He decided that he wanted a drink and stepped into the High Desert. Eddy Tagore wasn't there. At this hour only the bar was given any use. There were a couple of men there besides the bartender, both strangers to Duke, and both indifferent to his arrival. Dude had his drink. He bought a bottle and took it back to his hotel room. . . .

When Duke awakened from sleep atop the unturned-back bed covers he was uncomfortable from the fall chill that had crept into the unheated room. The light had faded, but when he sat up he noticed that the bottle on the stand was a third emptied. There was a whisky glass on the floor beside the bed. He had taken on a fair load, though he hadn't realized it because he had been lost in his long and secret thoughts. A man had reservoirs in his being that ought never to be stirred up.

Now he had a throbbing ache in his left temple, and his throat was dry. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he rolled a cigarette. Its taste was unpleasant and he ground it out. He poured a glass of whisky and it was more agreeable to his palate. The drink removed the raw edge that had returned to his nerves, and he poured himself another.

He brushed the perplexities aside and decided that what he needed was some concrete plan of action. He ought to decide just where he was going from here and how to get there. First, of course, there was Tagore and the warning he had published that he would kill Raglan on sight. That had to be settled before Duke was free to go anywhere. So he decided to take another look around to see if he could locate the man.

He hadn't taken on too much whisky for that. His hands were steady, his head clear, and his nerves seemed to have snapped back into place. He went down to the street, emerging onto it quietly. The last cold sun had disappeared behind the westward butte. Duke turned in a slant across the dusty street. When he stepped into the High Desert he was ready for whatever it held for him.

The saloon's lamps had already been lighted. Duke came through the door casually, and one sweeping glance told him that the thin crowd did not hold Tagore. But Ernie Griffen stood at the bar, and Ernie had wheeled about.

"Howdy, Duke," Ernie called, and his voice was wholly pleasant. "You don't need to look so edgy. When Tagore heard you'd hit town again, he decided to go fishing. I figured all along that his big talk was bluff."

Duke let out an almost audible sigh. He was free now, free to go. He had come to town, and the man who had challenged him had quietly pulled stakes. That left the slate clean and honorable for Duke Raglan. Unless Ernie was lying in hopes of getting Duke Raglan taken unawares. Duke considered that possibility, then dismissed it.

WALKING over to the bar, he said, "Anything to be settled between you and me, Ernie?"

"Yeah," Ernie said, "but there's no hurry. There's the money you owe me. But I quit worrying when I heard you were out at Burt Imbler's. Figured you'd be around long enough so I could collect. Have a drink, Duke?"

"Thanks, but I've had plenty till I've had some grub. Where'd Eddy go?"

"Probably he hit for yonder," Ernie

said. "I wouldn't know, though."

"Where'd Belle go?" Duke murmured.

"Why," Ernie said, "Belle and me don't hobnob much, Duke. But I heard she got her a house out on the edge of town. Over on the river. She comes to work here around nine-ten o'clock, if you want to see her. I don't."

"I do," Duke said.

He had his supper, pleased to hear that Belle not only changed residences and was still around. He couldn't figure out why she had wanted a house to live in. Maybe Belle had housekeeping instincts that finally demanded satisfaction. Maybe something had riled the deep things in Belle, too, forcing her to try to figure out a new angle for herself. When he came out of the restaurant, Duke decided not to wait until she came to work. Maybe he could find her house.

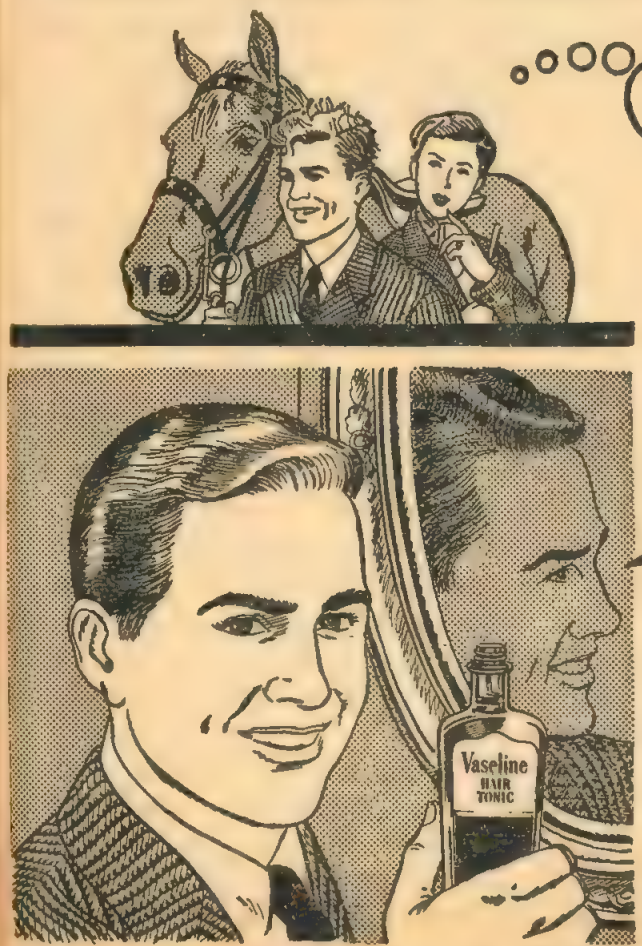
He rolled a cigarette, then lighted it and drew in smoke. Then he crossed to the other side of the street and turned right along the walk. As the buildings fell away, the road curved a little toward the river crossing. Brush stood on the sharply dropping but low banks of the Crooked. At a distance upstream was a stand of trees, through which lamplight showed plainly in the dusk. That looked like a good place to try.

When he came to a yard fence he halted. There was a girl on the porch, and the girl was Belle. She rose from a chair, not at first recognizing him. He called, "Howdy, Belle," and heard her quick cry. She had come down the steps by the time he had gone up the walk. Without a word, she caught his arm and drew him on into the house.

The lamplight in the room came full on her pleased yet worried face. "Duke!" she breathed. "You've been drinking. When you shouldn't even be in this town."

"If you mean Tagore," Duke said, "Ernie told me he run."

"Ernie did?" she said sharply. "Well, Tagore isn't the only one you should be afraid of, Duke." [*Turn page*]



"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"

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"Ernie, too?"

"And Milt Tews."

"All right," Duke said. "I'm scared of 'em all. Now, let's forget it and catch up on our visiting."

"Where are you going to stay tonight?" Belle asked.

"Got a hotel room."

"Don't stay in it. If you won't get out of town, stay here."

"Don't you have to work?" he asked.

Belle gave him a quick smile. "I don't have to do a damned thing I don't want to, and you should know it. But one thing I want to do. If you drift around all evening you'll go on a tear. Better you should do it here."

Duke knew then what had been bothering him. He had grown bored with his way of life, but hadn't realized it until now when all at once he wasn't bored a bit. He felt the warm excitement creep through his veins as he looked at Belle.

Yet he hadn't pegged her quite right, he guessed. She was lost in thought, and it was thought she didn't seem to want to share with him. Light from the lamp fell upon her, and he saw the rise and fall of her firm breasts. A frown, half-born, flitted on her face at his attention. Then she smiled.

"So how about another drink?" she said.

IT WAS GOOD talking with Belle. She had drawn the blinds of all the rooms and brought out a bottle of fine whisky and two water glasses. They were sitting by the kitchen table, which stood against a blank wall, and he thought she had steered him there out of design.

She drank the way an experienced woman drinks with a man, seeming to join him but only sipping the stuff. And they talked about everything under the sun except what was important—why she had followed Ernie Griffen here to east Oregon and why she had not killed the man if that was her purpose. Nor did she mention what had happened to her sister Hilda and the baby Hilda by now would have had.

But Duke Raglan was not naive. She was getting him drunk and serving some other mysterious purpose of her own in doing it. But Belle didn't want the money in his money-belt. He knew that. He talked and he listened, and finally drowsiness began to creek into his brain.

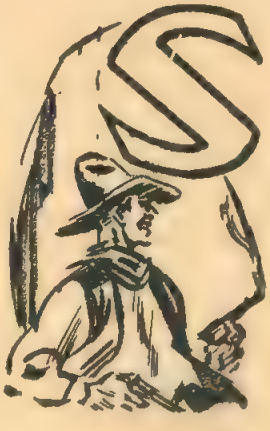
Belle took his arm and urged him to his feet.

"Better get back to the hotel," he muttered, "while I can still navigate."

She guided him toward a curtained doorway. "Not tonight," she said. "You'll sleep in there."

CHAPTER VI

Honkytonk Woman



SOMEHOW DUKE got to the bed and slumped across it. He felt Belle pulling off his boots. "Can't keep awake," he muttered. "Belle, tha's a dirty trick to play on a man."

"Maybe you won't always think so, Duke," he heard her receding voice saying, and then blankness swooped down on him.

He awakened to daylight, with a head full of pain. Yet his memory of the preceding night was vivid. He was in bed in Belle's house. Although his boots were off and blankets had been drawn over him, he was fully clad.

He threw back the blankets, rolled over, and swung his legs across the edge of the bed. His head seemed on the point of exploding as he sat up, and he wanted a gallon of water. His boots were on the floor, neatly side by side. Duke squinted his eyes and bit his jaw as he tugged them on. He rose to a rocky stand, then went out into the kitchen.

The back door was locked and bolted. The bottle was gone from the kitchen table, the glasses, the cigarette stubs that had heaped up in a saucer had been removed. Duke opened the door and stepped out to the porch. He had quenched his

thirst from the water pail and scrubbed his hot face before it dawned on him that the sight of him here, by somebody with curious eyes and a loose tongue, would do Belle no good. He stepped hastily indoors again.

Belle was in the front room, asleep under a blanket on the sofa. She looked tired, and her reposed face showed the lines of some inner care. "I took her bed," he thought miserably. But he wasn't going to awaken her. Tiptoeing, he found his hat, then quietly left the house. Guilt and shame tangled with his pride. He went back inside and could detect the handle of a gun outlined under her pillow. She had protected him from something.

"Frisco wouldn't have played it like I did," Duke thought. "Frisco's only a kid but he's the ramrod out at Cull Haven. He's got sense. He works for a living."

He looked down at Belle once more, feeling a rise of tenderness where last night he had felt only a raw and aggressive passion. Then he slipped out of the house again.

He got his kit from the hotel, his horse from the stable, and rode out of Prineville, but not taking the road that struck out for the Cascades and continuing adventures. Instead, Duke rode back toward the river crossing. Reaction had taken the hard set from his shoulders, and he felt inert and drained. He rode south through the dawn, unfreed by this visit to town, more deeply involved in perplexity than he had been when he had started from the Imblers' place.

Somehow he was not his own man any longer; somehow he had become involved in something that was holding him here against his will. Depression was a tangible weight on his shoulders.

Beyond the Crooked he took a different road to the one he had followed coming in with Ma Hopgood. This road ran along Bear Creek from its confluence with the river, crawling south toward the high desert. Soon the first sun was high above the pines of the Ochocos, though the bottomland was still gray and cold. Except for the cottonwoods along the streams and the far-flung and scattered juniper, there was little vegetation.

Later, as the detached island mass of Maury Mountain pulled near him, he left the road and began to enter the pines.

It was a major forest, the trees standing heavily about him, their matted branches cutting off the cool autumn sun. Floor-litter, dank and pungent, cushioned the steady footfalls of the horse. The silence grew so profound that the breathing of the animal became loud, and once when a woodpecker cut loose up in some pine Duke pulled straight and swung his head in alarm.

His horse had found a game trail and, since he had only an approximate direction in which he wished to travel, Duke let the trail lead him on. Occasionally other trails crossed and crisscrossed but, following some instinct, his horse moved steadily forward. Duke never crowded, and sometimes let the mount stop to blow.

AT MID-DAY he paused to give the animal a complete rest, but finding his own restlessness made worse by it, he presently retightened the latigo and rode on again. He wasn't up in the major mountain but presently realized that he had crossed a summit and was dropping down again. Once he came out atop a bench and had to find a way on down. Mountain meadows, well-grassed, began to appear.

In the late afternoon, because he had not hurried and had taken no direct route, he found himself approximately where he wanted to be. Again he stood his horse upon a rim and below him saw what he knew to be the land in contest. For some time he had been passing cattle wearing the crude T of Milt Tews' Tack. Now, in the far distance, he could see poplars with huddled shapes at their bases suggesting the Tack headquarters buildings. Eastward the terrain fell openly, the bare edge of land touching a gray sky. Along this margin were a couple of dots that apparently were nester shacks.

So Ma Hopgood's line camp lay beyond that horizon, and Duke was going to have a look at it, anyhow.

But not today. He was beat up from hours in the saddle and last night's drunk, and his horse had already put in a day's work. Down from his right was a creek and a woods. He had no camp gear, no food. But he wasn't hungry, and he could sleep under his saddle blanket. Duke swung back from the rim, found an easy descent, and half an hour later rode into the wood stand at the little creek.

He watered his horse and put it on picket. Then he spread out the saddle blanket, dropped down upon it, and was instantly asleep.

It was dark when he awakened, and he was cold. Above him and the woods the black heavens displayed a million blazing stars. A breeze was stirring and he pulled the saddle blanket closer over him. He smoked a cigarette, at last feeling nerves and muscles easing. Then he slept again.

He felt fully restored and ravenously hungry when he roused in another dawn. He washed at the creek, immediately saddled his horse and rode on. He had no wish to come upon any of the Tack riders. And he meant to be sure he cut a wide circle around the little Imbler spread.

For a long distance he followed the creek, its brush screening him much of the time. Thereafter he pointed due east, the nester claims wheeling slowly behind him. Then he was on the edge of a small saucer, watered and wooded and beautiful, and even without the buildings he might have guessed that it was Ma Hopgood's line camp.

Hunger gnawed at his middle, and he was tempted to ride down and see if Ma had a rider here who would provide breakfast. Even if the place was deserted, there was a good chance of there being food on hand. Duke rode on in to the camp.

Fortunately he had the place to himself. Before he swung out of saddle, he looked about again. The set-up took his eye. Maybe Ma used it for a line camp, but he was willing to bet that once it had served somebody as the headquarters of a nice little spread. The house, under old locusts, was mostly log, rounded out with dressed lumber. There was a small log barn and several first-rate corrals and a fenced-in pasture. There was a creek that, even after the long, dry summer, still ran plenty of water.

"Not bad," Duke told himself in the understatement of a gleeful man half-ashamed of his feeling. It surely wasn't a place that ugly-visaged old woman would hand over as a gift to a perfect stranger. It was bait, and mighty attractive bait, to some kind of a trap.

Duke went inside the house and found, as he had hoped, that it was kept stocked with simple food for the occasional use of Ma's riders. It was range custom for a hungry man to help himself under such circumstances, leaving a note if possible to convey his identity and his appreciation. Duke started coffee and selected a can of beans.

He was eating when his ears pricked up in sudden sharp attention. The sound of a horse came over the rolling land of the saucer. Not knowing whom to expect, Duke put down his tin cup of coffee. He was standing beside the door with his gun in his hand when the rider came quickly up before the house, abreast the door, and stopped.

WHEN HE SAW the rider, he pulled in a breath. It was a girl. She had seen his horse and was looking puzzled when she swung her face toward the house.

Duke slipped his gun back into holster and stepped through the doorway.

"Hilda," he said.

The girl was young, around nineteen as he remembered, and she looked like Belle except that youth and its carefree elations had not completely left her pretty face.

"Duke!" she breathed.

"I reckon," Duke drawled, "that we both want to ask the same question. Let's ask. What are we doing here?"

Hilda could still laugh, and her shape as she swung down was that of a girl again. Hilda had become a mother and completely recovered from it; the tragedy of that experience seemed to have left her face.

"All right," she said. "I just like to come over here sometimes for the ride. It's pleasant here. And private—usually, that is."

"You ride from where?" Duke said.

"Cull Haven."

"You live there?"

Hilda smiled wanly. "Why not, Duke? Ma Hopgood likes to take in strays, so we've been there the last year."

"Who's we?" Duke asked.

"My daughter and I," Hilda said. "She was born there, Duke."

He nodded, his throat tight. He hadn't meant to worm that out of Hilda. But the level honesty in her impressed him. She had loved a man and trusted a man and seen a world go smash. It was a blessing she could walk away from that.

"But I'm doing all the divulging, Duke," Hilda said, smiling. "I heard about you from Frisco. I wondered if it was the same Duke Raglan."

"So you're another reason why Belle's in Prineville," Duke said. And now he had a sharp, gnawing wonder about Ernie Griffen, whether Hilda was the reason why he, too, had come to this country. But Duke didn't care to ask that of Hilda, into whose privacy he had already blundered too far. "All right," he added. "Ma tried to sell me on this claim and done a better job on me than I realized. I come out for a look."

"Are you going to file on it?"

He grinned. "So you know about it, do you?"

"Burt Imbler wants you to stay," Hilda answered. "So does Frisco. They know trouble's coming. Duke—do it."

"Hell," Duke said, "I reckon I knew this morning I was going to buy chips in their game. Take me to Cull Haven, Hilda. Ma'll have to give me the legal description to this place so I can file on the right one. And I hear it's a long ride to Lakeview and the land office."

"Duke, you're a darling!" Hilda said, and she was smiling. . . .

It took Duke four days to make the ride to Lakeview, file on the piece of open land that Ma Hopgood called North Camp, and get back. He could file on only a hundred and sixty acres of the section, but it gave him the part he needed and constituted a spearhead turned against the aggressive intentions of the Tack. He had worked that out carefully.

To move against the nester colony, or the main part of it, Tews would have to come up the creek. And Ma had plotted a homestead claim around North Camp that joined the two claims of nesters closer to the Tack. The three effectively blocked off the open land to the east that would let Tews infiltrate the colony and grind it to bits with the attritions a big ranch can work on a smaller one.

"If Tews was half as smart as he is greedy," Ma told Duke, "he'd have seen this weakness and had his own man take up North Camp. But Tews thinks slow, and he would have had to declare open war on me to do it. It ain't ever occurred to him that I might voluntarily hand the piece over to some squatter. Now you, Burt Imbler, and a tough jigger called Cotton Woody stand square across his way."

Duke was committed, but only for a while. If the trouble wasn't settled sooner, in six months he would have the option of buying the claim at the negligible cost of a dollar and a quarter an acre instead of having to prove up. The requisite improvements were already there. He had only to live at North camp and make some gainful use of it to fulfill the terms of the law.

CHAPTER VII

Tinhorn's Try

WHEN DUKE saw the little Imbler buildings in the distance ahead of him, day was running out. His horse was tired again, but no more so than the rider. Slowly riding in, he attracted no attention and wondered why not. Going to the barn, he tended to his horse,

then, carrying his belongings, he walked toward the house. A lamp already glowed in the window, and now he saw a face beyond the window and knew it was Laury's. She had seen him but had not emerged to greet him. So she really had it in for him.

By the time he reached the porch, he saw through the glass of the kitchen door that she had recrossed to the stove, where she was cooking supper. She came casually at his knock, opened the door, and pulled a polite look of surprise onto her face.

"How nice," she said. "Come in, Duke. You're just in time for supper."

"Could a man put up overnight?" Duke asked.

"I reckon a man could," Laury reflected. Though she looked fresh and neat as always, her eyes seemed tired. "Burt's out somewhere, but if I know Burt he'll be back in time for supper."

Irritation bit Duke hard. When he had ridden away from here there had been every chance that he would meet and have it out with Tagore. Laury seemed to have forgotten that completely. She showed no relief that he had returned safe and sound. She evidenced no curiosity about what had happened.

At that moment Burt rode into the yard. He swung down and thumped across the porch, grinning. "Duke!" he whooped. "Thought it was you I seen heading in here! Man, have Laury and me been walking the floor!"

"Why, I have not!" Laury blazed, but turned her face hurriedly.

"There wasn't any scrap," Duke said. "Tagore run."

Then it was that he saw the rise of Laury's breast, its quick fall, the easing of her features. That made the situation a whole lot more to Duke's liking. Then, with a toss of her head, Laury began to take up supper energetically.

The meal was over before Duke broached the matter on his mind. "Burt," he said, "you know where a man could buy a few steers?"

Burt batted his eyes. "I sure do. But what man wants to buy any steers?"

"Me," Duke commented.

"Steers take graze, man."

"I've homesteaded a piece I hear is called North Camp," Duke drawled.

"So Ma put it over!" Burt said with a whoop. "Laury, you swore—"

"Shut up," Laury said. But her face had turned toward Duke, her eyes widening, her mouth dropping open. A lustre started from deep in her eyes and came to the surface. It looked like she was pleased to find that she had been wrong.

Burt knew a man with cattle to sell, but it was far down on the Metolius. So early the next morning the two men were asaddle, leading a pony packed with camping equipment. Duke had left his own stuff behind at the Imbler place, and all but what money he would need to pay for the cattle he meant to buy. Ma Hopgood had offered to furnish him with stockers, but he had turned that down flat. He wanted to be under no obligation to Ma so that he could pull out any time he saw fit.

But by morning there was a fly in Duke's ointment. As the evening's talk had progressed Laury seemed to have divined something of the fact that he was withholding a part of himself from this venture, that he had his fingers crossed and his private reservations. She had all but lost her first enthusiasm for Ma Hopgood's achievement.

Burt and Duke rode straight across country toward the ford of the Deschutes. They camped that night on the river. Late the next day they reached an isolated little ranch on the Metolius, deep in what Burt said was called the lower desert. It was too lonely, the rancher said, and he was ready to sell off and get out.

SINCE Burt still considered Duke to be a tinhorn gambler, Duke kept out of it and let Burt do the dickering. But he agreed with Burt that the stuff for sale looked good. The owner was a shoestringer. He had less than a hundred head, and after a little jowering the deal was made at a price Burt said was good for this country. Before nightfall, Duke found

himself owning a bill of sale for slightly under a hundred head of mixed stuff, far more than he could handle on his quarter-section the year around.

"You ought to learn as fast as I did," Burt told Duke as they slept in the rancher's barn. "And a lot more. Sis got all the brains in our family. Don't know what I'm going to do when she marries some cuss. Have to marry a smart woman to take her place, I guess."

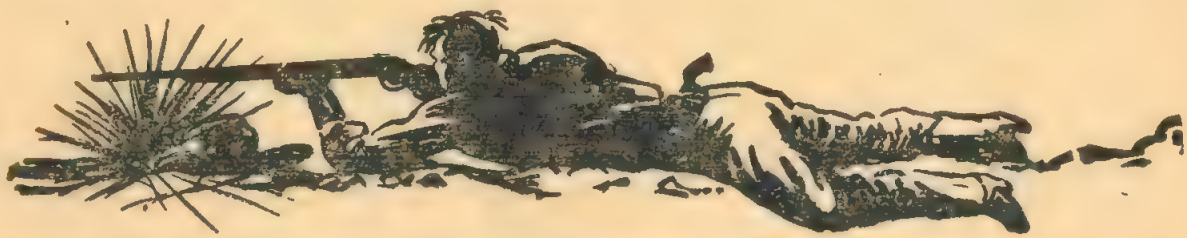
"Laury got any intentions?" Duke asked.

Burt grunted and apparently fell asleep without replying.

Early the next morning they started the long drive home. A few hours took them off the lower desert and back onto the plateau. Thereafter they pointed east toward the river, following the trail from Camp Polk.

Around eleven that morning the little bunch passed close to the north of a large rock outcrop of volcanic origin. The cattle were broken to the trail by then, moving slowly because of the young stuff, but needing little attention. Burt, after pointing the cut for a time, had fallen back with Duke, and the two rode in silent and comfortable companionship.

Presently Burt drawled, "Duke, you've



been running a sandy. You're no greenhorn. You handle these critters better than I do. Who you trying to—"

The sharp, wholly unexpected crack of a rifle cut off Burt's words. Both horses made startled jumps. Duke hauled down his mount, even as he swung instinctively toward the rock scab, the only possible place for an ambush in the vicinity. He could see nothing. They were fully exposed to the rifleman, with no place to take cover.

Duke was considering this when he heard a plopping sound behind him. Fear clutched his throat as he swung to look. He saw Burt let go and fall limply from saddle. Miraculously his boot cleared the stirrup as his horse lunged again when once more the rifle spoke viciously.

Duke spotted the attacker that time, high among the rocky knobs. He spurred, jerking up his gun. The man had left his horse on the blind side of the outcrop, and that was where Duke headed. He swung in at the end of the outcrop, then around it, quickly cutting himself off from the man's sights. He saw the fellow's mount, which the man himself had grown concerned about. The rifleman had changed position. His weapon spoke again, and a bullet spanged into Duke's hat. The man was sliding across the rock, bent on saving his horse. Duke swore as he recognized Eddy Tagore.

Duke shot just as Tagore shouldered the rifle to shoot again. He saw Tagore throw up a hand, and watched the rifle clatter down on the rough rock. Then Tagore pitched forward and slid to the ground.

"Lord knows how long he's been spying on me," Duke thought. "Watching for a chance."

No matter what Duke's shot had accomplished, the headlong spill onto the lower rock had broken Tagore's neck. Sure of that, Duke sent his horse pounding back around the rock, thinking only of Burt, horrified by what had happened in the past moments. As he crossed the open toward the still shape of Burt on the ground, he saw that the steers were scrambling forward in the distance, spooked by the shooting. Duke didn't care about that. He swung down beside his friend and hunkered.

Burt had been knocked out cold because a rifle bullet carries a shocking im-

pact when it hits bone, and he had been shot through the shoulder. Yet what Duke felt in relief was offset by mounting anger. At the moment, however, his concern was all for Burt, and he set to work to bind the wound with strips torn from his shirt, in order to stop the flow of blood. Burt had taken a bullet intended for Duke Raglan, which had created a bond and an obligation Duke had no least thought of sidestepping, ever.

Burt spoke presently, as his eyes came open. "You all right, Duke?"

"All of a piece," Duke said. "It was Tagore. I got him."

"The steers?"

"Hell with 'em," Duke answered.

THAT was all from Burt. Duke carried him to the shade of the rocks. Thereafter he caught Burt's escaped horse and brought it in to the rock. He knew that Burt was tough enough to pull through this all right but, forced to wait idly, Duke began to shake. Tagore was dead, but the tinhorn was only a minor note in the thing. Tews, Ernie Griffen—those two would not be as easily dealt with as Tagore had been.

But Duke's reaction was not fear. The human nervous system can stand only so much tension, after which it must throw it off. Duke had his aftermath while waiting to take Burt Imbler to help.

It was two hours later when Burt said drunkenly, "What the hell we round-siding here for, Duke? Let's get on with the drive."

Duke made him rest on the ground a while longer, and by the end of that time Burt was belittling his wound. "You're going to the doctor in Prineville," Duke said sternly. "If you can stick a saddle that long."

"You bought some steers."

"So I did."

"Well, let's round 'em up and take 'em home."

Duke grinned, helped Burt onto his horse, and they started on. By the time they had reached the Deschutes crossing Burt had forgotten the cattle and was slumped in the saddle, his face twisted with pain. He had dropped into a kind of apathy that had not lifted when, in late evening, Duke rode into Prineville with him.

The doctor took charge and insisted that Burt be put to bed at the doctor's own house. That suited Duke, though Burt cursed the doctor and Duke and Eddy Tagore. But they got Burt to bed, and Duke threatened to rope him there. Then the doctor gave the wounded man a hypodermic, and at last Burt slipped away from his pain, and slept.

Assured by the doctor that Burt would receive the best of care, Duke remembered his steers. They were his, and by damn he meant to get them and chouse them to North Camp, which was his spread. The shooting of Burt had done something to Duke. He couldn't define it, but it was going to steer him on a straighter course in the future.

His horse was played out, and so was Duke. He stabled the animal at the livery, got himself a room and turned in. He was on the trail at daylight, heading for the distant Deschutes. He was back on the Cascades plateau at nightfall. His cattle had come to the river and scattered along it, he found. The pack pony was trailing with the steers. Duke caught it easily and, relieved, made camp.

The next morning he rounded up the bunch and threw the cattle across the river at the ford. The doctor had agreed to report Burt's shooting and the death of Tagore to the sheriff, so Duke never went near the fateful scabrock. He pointed his little tag of cattle—the first he had ever owned — across the high desert toward home. That's what he called it. Home.

It took the better part of three days to reach the Imbler claim, and Duke got there without having to drop even a calf. He saw the distant buildings, softened by fading day, with a sense of deep satisfaction and yet of dread. Except for him, Burt wouldn't have got shot, and Duke didn't know how Laury was going to take that. What was more, she was going to be on her own out here until Burt was well enough to come home.

Yet Duke felt an odd elation at the thought of seeing her again. Somehow he was going to show her that her stubborn cynicism about him was unfounded and uncalled-for.

CHAPTER VIII

Bitter Kiss

LAURY had been watching anxiously. Duke realized that when he saw her horse heading out from the shack. Duke waved his hat and saw her put her mount into swift motion as it must have dawned on her that he was alone. He swallowed hard as she rode up, for her face was stiff with concern.

"Where's Burt?" she cried.

He told her honestly, for the doctor had said that there was no real danger for Burt unless unforeseen complications developed. Duke had to admire the way Laury took it, silently, her eyes clouding with pain as she thought of Burt's pain. But she had no censure to make of Duke.

"Doc said Burt'll probably have to stay there a week or two," Duke told her. "There's no hurry about me getting on to North Camp. Figured I'd stay here till Burt gets home if you can stand me."

He saw that she was relieved by the offer. Yet she was still preoccupied. Turning her horse, she fell in with him, and they ran the new steers on to the Imbler bottomland.

"I've got bad news for you, too, Duke," Laury said, as they returned to the house. "And it's my fault. With Burt gone, I had to be out a lot. You left your money, and you didn't try to hide it. Well, I should have thought to hide it, myself, before I left the house to do the range work."

"Somebody stole it?" Duke thundered.

Laury glanced away. "Yesterday when I got back to the house I saw a horse had been standing by the porch since I left. I had a funny feeling. I checked and—your money wasn't where you put it."

"Good Lord!" Duke groaned.

Without that money he was as good as broke, for he had taken along only enough to buy the cattle and had only a couple of hundred of that left. He was pegged down here until he had made a new stake, and at this stage of the game he would never get into a big game of poker in this country.

"I'm sorry, Duke," Laury said. "It was my fault." She looked miserable.

"Think nothing of it," he grunted.

"I tried to pick up sign," Laury added. "But there's just too many different sets of tracks around."

"It'd be Ernie Griffen!" Duke fumed.

"Or Milt Tews," Laury said. "Tews has been trying to starve us nesters out. He wouldn't want to see a man with money on our side. Other people's troubles have always kept Ma Hopgood broke, and she doesn't have much cash."

They had come to the house. Duke put up the horses while Laury went in to start supper. But he looked around for sign and, like Laury, could pick nothing out of the miscellany of hoof, boot and wagon tracks about the house. He checked, wondering if Laury had known where to look, but his money-belt and the long coin purse of gold coins were gone from his valise, which had been kept under his bed. He looked outside once more.

There was no use crying over spilled milk, Duke reflected. He had been a rich man for a matter of two or three weeks. But he was still a land owner, and he still owned a little cut of steers. Let anybody try to take either of those away from him! Meanwhile he would find out who had been here, and he would have his money back by the time he was in position to light a shuck.

Somehow it gave him a strange feeling of serenity to walk toward the shack and Laury, who was fixing supper for him and herself. Being broke wasn't too bad when a man had shelter and food and a pretty girl for companionship.

Duke washed up before he entered the

house, and by then Laury was taking up the food. She seemed relieved that he wasn't angry with her about the stolen money, as relieved as he was to see that she didn't hold him too responsible for Burt's trouble. They sat down together to their meal.

SOON after supper Duke went to sleep in the attic bed that Burt had used during his previous visit. The next morning he quietly took over the chores, telling Laury to stay at the house and catch up with her work there. If she thought it was strange that a gambler would know how to handle ranch work, she made no comment. He kept busy until noon, then took a look at his own stuff and found it doing all right.

That night it opened up and rained. "You might as well stay in and help me catch up with the housework," Laury said to Duke at breakfast. "No use drowning yourself."

Duke grinned and rode out. But when he came back drenched, at noon, with everything tended to that needed it, he felt free to slack off for the rest of the day.

He found a mail order catalogue and took a chair by the fire to read. When Laury had tidied up after their noon meal, she came in to join him, fetching along a basket of sewing. She sat primly in her chair and fell to work, and her face looked relaxed and contented. Duke returned to his catalogue.

Some time later he heard the basket fall to the floor. When he looked up, startled, it was to grin. Laury's head was canted over, a hand had fallen limply from her lap after the basket had fallen, and she was sound asleep. Duke sat there in delight because she looked like a button who had tried to stay up too long with the grown folks. And in another minute she was going to fall out of that chair.

He rose quietly and moved to her. Bending, he got one hand under her arms, his other arm under her knees. She was light as a feather, warm as a new biscuit, as sweet-smelling as clover in the rain. He carried her to the old sofa and lowered her gently onto it. And as he placed her down the very old Nick rose in him and he gently bent and kissed her lips.

He wished he hadn't. Something went through him that was ladled out of a witch's kettle. His lips crushed hungrily to hers, and all at once her lips came alive and her arms came up about his neck. Then suddenly she opened her eyes and shoved him hard.

She gasped, "Duke Raglan! What on earth!"

He couldn't do a thing but straighten with cheeks as hot as a depot stove. "Blast it!" he breathed. "Saint Peter couldn't have kept from it! And you kissed back!"

She rubbed her mouth with the back of her hand as if to remove an unpleasant taste. "I thought I was dreaming," she said. "And not about you, Duke Raglan. I thought I was being carried across a creek. By a gentleman."

"Lord A'mighty!" Duke exploded. "So that's how you act with a stranger!"

"It was my dream, Duke Raglan. It's none of your business what I was doing in it." She turned her back and was still and silent.

He was graveled. He hadn't made a habit of it, but he had kissed a few girls before, and he had never had one scrub a kiss off. He picked up the catalogue but had lost interest in it. Laury jumped when he dropped it flatly to the floor. Presently she rose and went out to the kitchen. It was quiet out there for a long while, then she reappeared in the doorway between the two rooms.

"Duke," she said, "I think you better take your steers on over to North Camp. I can make out here alone, all right."

"It looks like a good idea," Duke breathed.

"Then you're welcome to use it," she said, and vanished.

Duke saddled up. There was enough of the day left that he could make it to his claim before dark. With elaborate politeness he asked Laury for the loan of the pack-horse that had made the trip to the Metolius, and the loan was as politely

granted. He lashed on his belongings and rode out through the downpour, his coat collar turned up against it, his face growing wet and glowering as he left. Maybe she was afraid of herself as much as of him, and maybe she had reason to be frightened, considering the wallop she had put in that kiss. But laying the blame on him and acting like it had been so obnoxious to her!

HE REACHED North Camp in the gathering dusk and found everything shipshape and a little more than that. When he had turned his new steers out along the creek, he entered the cabin to find it had been swept and tidied. The bunk had been filled with fresh straw, and the woodbox had been filled. There were blankets folded on the table, provisions on the shelves, and a complete set of cooking and eating utensils. Ma Hopgood had been over here, probably, or had sent somebody from Cull Haven. Duke appreciated that.

He put his horse in the barn, then returned to the little cabin. He started a fire before he shucked off his wet clothing. He wished he had a change, but he didn't own one. So when the room was sufficiently warm, he stripped and hung his things by the stove to dry. He cooked supper.

He was busy at that when he heard horses come thumping into his yard, their approach muffled by the pelting rain. He had time only to grab a blanket and pull it about him. There hadn't been the usual call from the near distance, or he would have heard that, or a polite knock on the door.

The lamp guttered as the door swung inward, the gusty wind carrying rain ahead of the man who came through. Another man came in on the heels of the first. Duke had pulled straight.

"Tews," he said calmly, "most men knock on another man's door."

Milt Tews kept the glower he had worn into the room. Ernie Griffen grinned in cold amusement. The slickers and hats of both poured water on the cabin floor.

"Whose door you talking about?" Tews asked.

"My door."

Light played in Tews' narrowed eyes and in itself said things to Duke Raglan that put a chill in his bones. "Was them your steers a man of mine seen coming in here this evening?" he demanded.

"You're too full of questions," Duke retorted.

"I got more questions," Tews said. "You gone to work for Cull Haven?"

"For myself," Duke said. "Now, get the hell off my property."

"Ah," Tews said. The strange light was still in his eyes, and suddenly it was light that could have frozen water. "You filed on it. And Ma Hopgood got you to. That scheming old she—"

"Easy, man," Duke said softly. "And since you're so handy answering your own questions, you can answer the rest of 'em. Take that puma in hair pants of yours and clear out."

"Funny," Ernie Griffen said thinly, "that a man heeled as well as you should turn greasy-sacker."

"Still figure me well-heeled, do you, Ernie?" Duke asked pointedly.

Ernie's face held a stoniness that gave Duke the sudden feeling that the man knew nothing of the stolen money. Duke didn't know about Tews, but wasn't going to make any accusations until he knew what he was doing. Right now Tews was plenty preoccupied with what had happened here at North Camp. Ma Hopgood had called him a slow-thinking, short-sighted man, but now Tews was getting a close look at things.

Tews said, "You won't stay here," and swung around. Mumbling to himself, he went through the doorway.

The door had been pushed open without invitation, and they left it open when they departed. Ernie said no more, only giving Duke that grin of his that held everything except what a grin was meant to convey. . . .

THE drenching fall rain stopped during the night. When Duke had eaten his breakfast, he saddled his horse and rode out for a look at his new property.

In terms of the range as he had known it as a boy, it was only a splinter parcel, a tag-end of land. Even in good grass country like this it took ten acres of graze to carry one steer around the calendar. By that rule, he had laid claim to enough land for a herd of sixteen head.

But few cattle outfits, no matter what the size, owned more than a section or two of land on which to establish headquarters facilities and to form a base and a heart for the operation. The main reliance was upon the free, open grass of the public domain. By that token he had a start in the cattle business, if he wanted one.

Duke was surprised that the idea had a certain appeal. Here was a good house and barn, tight corrals and a sizable horse pasture, ready at hand. The hill-girt, saucering bottomland would make good shelter if kept for the worst of winter. Back of Cull Haven was grazing area not in use by stockmen nor taken up as yet by squatters. Ma had promised Duke the right-of-way across her property if, and as long as, he wanted it, and to work out a permanent arrangement if he so desired.

A man could take off from what Duke Raglan had here and go somewhere. If he wanted to do it—always Duke made that qualification to himself. But temporarily he was a man of substance. The thought made his spine tingle pleasantly. It wasn't too hard to see now why some people took root and would fight to the death to keep those roots from being torn up.

He could even glimpse why people of that breed — like Laury Imbler — could look upon a Duke Raglan as too inconsequential to take seriously.

Why, a kiss from Duke Raglan had better be scrubbed off before it had done too much damage.

Yet, when it came to damages—Duke pondered the change that had begun to take hold in him. It was Laury Imbler who had started things working in his mind. Before he had come up against her and her brother, his drifting ways had seemed like the only kind of life for him. Now that was changed.

CHAPTER IX

A Man of Consequence

HOURS of slow and thoughtful riding showed Duke the rest of his domain. There was a mesa on his west edge to which he climbed. His first circuitous visit to North Camp had helped him get his bearings. But, sitting his saddle on the high rim, he made a closer study of it, aware of the importance to a range man of knowing his locality like the palm of his hand.

West sprawled the Tack, the biggest ranch in the vicinity. Closer to the Tack than was North Camp, and winging outward from the new claim were those of Burt Imbler and Cotton Woody, whom Duke had not yet met. Eastward was the main greasy-sack settlement, holding down land that Tews had once used and which he still hoped to regain. Ma Hopgood had worked out this new claim in such a way that it touched back corners of those of the other two squatters, creating an effective barrier of occupied land between the Tack and the main nester colony.

Far north of where Duke sat this morning the blued outlines of the Ochocos appeared in the haze. The river lay over there and much of the main Crooked River bottom. The ranchers out there were mainly indifferent to the local struggle, Ma had said. She was the only big outfit close enough to the Tack to be worried about Tews' obvious ambitions. And few ranchers were given to much concern as to the welfare of a nester settlement.

The rolling range of Cull Haven ran south of Duke's viewpoint, lifting partly against Maury Mountain and partly against the high desert. But that way was friendship and help for the squatters, an ugly old woman with a heart full of love. There also was a kid called Frisco, a rag-

tag crew of the old and infirm that Ma had gathered through the years, a girl with memories no girl her age ought to have, and the cutest baby girl Duke had ever seen.

No, it wasn't going to be bad holding on here long enough to help Ma protect her charges. It wouldn't be distasteful to set Milt Tews back on his heels.

Meanwhile, there was work to do. Duke got busy with it. In the three years he had rambled the Western trails he had kept active. He had ridden herd and fought his fights. He had kept in good physical shape, but still that was not the kind of stamina needed by a working man. He was soft, and as this was disclosed to him he began to detest it. It drove him and caused him to undertake the toughest jobs he could find.

A line camp, used only when needed, is not kept in the kind of condition a rancher wants at his headquarters. So there was much that needed attention at North Camp.

Duke fixed some leaks in the cabin roof and repaired chinking and even washed the grimed windows. The original builder had fixed himself a fireplace, which later had been plugged up. Duke pulled out the gunnysack wadding and found the thing had been abandoned because it filled the cabin with smoke. So he carried rock from the creek, mixed a clay mortar and extended the chimney's height. It was hard, slow going. But when he was finished, the fireplace roared and crackled and left the cabin air clean.

That called for much more wood than the kitchen stove would need. Well, there was a fringe of detached pine on his north end. He had a crosscut saw, an ax, wedges, and a sledge. He also had a wish to enjoy his fireplace now that it drew properly. It was too late in the year for the wood to cure properly, but it would burn. He could borrow a team and wagon from Cull Haven to haul it.

Frisco rode over a week after Duke had moved to North Camp. He seemed to note a change in the place and looked about with interest. He grinned at Duke, whom he had caught putting up some more shelves in the kitchen.

"Fixing to bring a wife over here, Duke?" Frisco asked.

"Fixing to knock your head off if you don't quit grinning. Who do I owe for getting this place dunged out for me?"

"Ma sent Al Taney over," Frisco drawled.

"Well, thank 'em both, and I hope to return it."

FRISCO waved a dismissing hand. He hadn't stepped down from the saddle, and it was probable that some outriding job had brought him close, so he had decided to come on over. He had seen the steers Duke had brought in and expressed a favorable opinion of them.

Then Frisco said, "Seen anything of Tews?"

"They come over," Duke said. "First night I was here. But they didn't stay."

Nor did Frisco, who rode off presently.

The hard work wrought the change that Duke wanted; he was getting tough again. His head wound was completely healed and haired over and forgotten. The happenstance of his having taken a few hundred dollars more than he needed, when he went with Burt to buy the cattle had left him with enough money to hold out here at this modest scale of living for a long while.

But the money wouldn't last forever, and as he sat by the warm light of his fireplace in the cold evenings, Duke tried to figure out how he might find out who had robbed him so he could get back his big stake. Or else how he was going to earn additional money if he failed in that. He'd get a calf drop in the spring—if he stayed that long, of course — and probably he would be able to market a few steers the ensuing fall. But that wouldn't bring him much.

Frisco dropped by again, just at noon of a pleasant fall day. He had a sack on his saddle, and as he swung down at the cabin said, "One of the boys was up on the mountain and got a buck. Figured you might like a chunk of it."

"I sure would," Duke replied. "There's steam in beans, but they sure don't hold a man's interest. If you've got time, we could fry a couple of slices."

"I've got time," Frisco said. He put up his horse, reminding Duke that the Cull Haven punchers knew this place even better than he did.

Duke sliced a couple of steaks from the venison round, put the rest of the meat back in the sack and hung it in the backyard shade. He dug out some bacon grease and put it in his skillet, and had the steaks frying when Frisco came up from the barn. The kid—Duke could think of Frisco in no other way—seemed pleased by the occasion.

While they were eating, Frisco said, "You know, Duke, we always relied on putting some feeders out here through the worst of the winter."

Duke looked puzzled. He had more than overstocked the property himself and would have to make arrangements for extra range. Frisco had a faintly concerned look on his face, which was odd. Ma Hopgood herself had made the proposition that resulted in this line camp being lost to Cull Haven.

"We'd like to keep on," Frisco added, "and Ma figured that maybe we could make a deal with you."

"What kind?" Duke asked suspiciously.

"Ma thought maybe if we brought in some concentrates, you'd feed a cut for us this winter."

Duke, relieved, looked up with interest. "I might," he admitted, "if I could put up the work for enough concentrates to carry my own bunch through."

Frisco nodded solemnly. "That's what she's got in mind. And we'd better set to hauling the feed over before the rain knocks the bottom out of the ground."

The deal was made that easily, and it wasn't until after Frisco had gone that Duke got to wondering. He began to suspect that Ma needed extra feeding arrangements less than she needed to be sure Duke Raglan brought his stuff through the winter. But it was still a good proposition, of benefit to both outfits, and for the time it solved Duke's problem of possessing a herd larger than his ranch.

Two of Ma's wagons arrived at North Camp before noon the next day, loaded down with cottonseed cake. And the wagons repeated each day thereafter until the barn at North Camp bulged with the feed. Then the same punchers came in a-saddle, driving a hundred head of mixed cattle to be left in Duke's charge.

DUKE began to realize that he was rapidly acquiring a full time job. Two hundred head of cattle not yet fully settled on a graze were about all one man could handle by himself, particularly in the heavy part of the winter. This became Duke's uppermost concern, but meantime he found the opportunity to work at the woodcutting and to make the remaining repairs and improvements that North Camp needed.

Each day he outrode his property lines, seeing nothing of any of the Tack outfit nor any of his other neighbors. But each time he thought of Burt he thought of Laury and his anger flared anew, and he refused to ride over to their place. Burt had nothing to keep him away from North Camp, but he didn't show up.

There came a day when Duke realized he had ought to make a trip to town and replenish supplies before the onset of really bad weather. He knew that Cull Haven was the kind of ranch that hauled such things out by the wagonload each fall, and that Ma would be glad to let him draw on her stores. But Duke had already got himself integrated more than he liked with Cull Haven. He aimed to row his own boat as much as he could.

He had the pack-horse he had brought over from the Imblers' and which he had been too stiff-backed to return until he was certain Burt had come home. Duke decided to take the loan of the horse once more, and in town he could find out where Burt was now. But the trip would take two days, and it worried Duke a little to leave the place alone that long.

Probably he had ought to ride over to Cull Haven and get somebody to come and

stay in his absence. But that would be borrowing from Ma again, leaning on her. He decided to go and come as swiftly as possible and take the chance on the Tack meddling while he was away.

He left North Camp at daybreak the next morning, leading the pack-horse and its empty wooden saddle. He had decided against taking the road at the start, due to the chance of being observed by unfriendly eyes and inviting a visitation of trouble at the camp in his absence. So he retraced the route he had followed on his first covert visit, climbing the slant to the southwest toward the distant timber. And in the late afternoon he reached the last butte, the high one before Prineville. It was not a bad view, as scenery went.

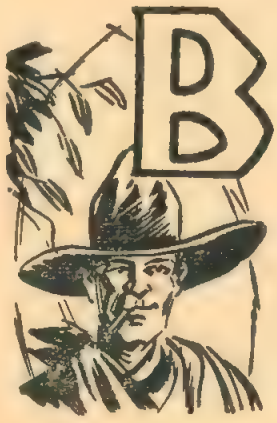
He paused on the eminence to look down on the housetops below him, his gaze straying to the detached structure among the trees of the river bank he knew to be occupied by Belle Lyons. Yet his awareness was not consciously upon this act nor upon Belle. An uneasiness had come to him, a warning. He did not often experience such premonitions, but whenever he had, in the past, something had come of them; and when it finally would come, he later found himself wishing he had heeded this sixth sense.

It was still three hours until sundown. He would do his buying at the mercantile and move the stuff to the livery. Bright and early in the morning he would pack up and get out of town. In the interval he —well, he was a man to meet events as they befell him. He swung his horse on down the grade, in the general direction of the river.

He crossed the river and presently came onto a placid street. Hitch-racks showed the unchanging pattern of hipshot cow ponies, buckboards and heavy-wheeled wagons that had angled in. Men passed along the walks, intent on their own purposes, giving the passing saddle horse and pack-animal no more than a cursory inspection. Duke went directly to the mercantile, tied his horses and went in, thinking over his order. He would try to get his orders filled as quickly as possible.

CHAPTER X

Strange Hostility



BY SIX o'clock Duke's saddle packs were made up and at the livery. He had a feeling that a smart man would start out for home right off, making camp somewhere away from here. But he wanted to see the doctor and find out about Burt and—Belle. Yes, he wanted to see Belle again.

The medico wasn't in his office, and a note on the door told that he was out of town on a call. Duke went to the restaurant and had his supper. After that he crossed to the High Desert Saloon for a drink and in hope he would see somebody who could bring him up to date on Burt. He downed the drink, but there was nobody in the place who looked capable of answering his question.

Duke went to the hotel and took a room then, knowing he was really waiting for the evening to grow late enough for him to go see Belle at her house before she came to the saloon.

He had been in so many of the plain, bare rooms that were available in typical cow-towns that the one he now occupied was in no way distinctive. He tipped the straight-backed chair against the wall and sat with one long leg hooked over the other, building cigarettes and smoking them absently. He was thinking that his rôle had changed a lot since his other hotel sojourns. His clothes were ragged, though he had new ones in his pack now. His nails were broken, his hands grimed, his hair shaggy. And he felt damned good.

A little after eight he left the hotel, not intending to stay at Belle's any longer than for a short visit. Day had run out, and the few lamps threw a wavering yellow light against the night. The vehicles had cleared away from the hitching-rails,

but more cowponies had taken their place. Somewhere beyond walls a man cut loose with a burst of laughter, into which a woman's laugh was blended.

Duke was tramping toward the high butte west of the town, but short of the river bridge he cut to his left toward the distant huddle of trees. Again lamplight came to him and its sight lifted the beat of his heart. He was embarrassed about his previous visit to Belle's, the big drunk that had ensued, the shame-faced way he had slipped off without leave-taking or gratitude the next morning. Then he came again to her gate.

He paused a moment, frowning. Someone had moved indoors, and Duke wasn't certain, but had the impression that it was a man. He watched the window a moment, seeing no more, then pulled back his shoulders and went on.

As he came up, the door swung open and a man stepped into view. He had his hat in his hand, and Belle appeared behind him. They were on the tail end of a conversation.

"Burt!" Duke yelled. "You old warthog!"

Burt Imbler lifted his head to squint against the darkness. A smile broke on Belle's face. Then Duke clumped onto the porch, grinning broadly.

Burt didn't grin. His face stiffened as Duke came into view. He didn't lift a hand to reach the one that Duke extended. He only stared at Duke an instant, then grunted, "Howdy."

Duke halted, staggered by this hostility. Then it hit him, and he said, "Burt, what did Laury tell you?"

"Why," Burt drawled. "Nothing except that she had to ask you to leave."

"Why, that onery little—" Duke howled, then he fell silent.

It wasn't the mounting chill in Burt's eyes that halted him. Duke wasn't going to blame Laury for the fact that he had kissed her nor insist that Laury had liked it well enough when it happened and hadn't changed her mind about it until afterward. No — it was Belle. She was looking puzzled and yet amused.

Burt swung and said, "Night, Belle," then turned again and went down the steps. Duke had his mouth open as he watched the man's back recede into the night. Then he heard Belle's voice.

"Come in, Duke. I hear you've turned honest."

HE STEPPED in, awkwardly holding his hat. "Go ahead and kick me, too," he said. "You got more right than Burt had."

"But less wish, maybe," Belle said. "Sit down, Duke."

"Didn't know you knew him," Duke went on, taking a chair and still glowering.

"I know Burt well," Belle retorted. "And we got to spending time together while he was convalescing here in town. Since he went home he's taken to coming in quite frequently."

"That," Duke said, "has all the earmarks of courting."

"It at least keeps him away from the trouble spots," Belle said, and smiled slightly.

Duke grinned sheepishly. "Well, it works, and it's sure easy to take. I come to thank you for the hospitality that night. There was something up. What was it?"

"Ernie Griffen lied when he told you Tagore had left town," Belle answered. "I guessed it the minute you told me what Ernie had said about it. I happened to know better, and it looked like Ernie was trying to help Tagore get a surprise jump on you. But you were too tight to be persuaded that night, Duke."

"Burt's shoulder get all right?" Duke asked.

Belle nodded. "He claims it's better than ever. Duke, I was floored when Burt told me you've taken a homestead."

"I seen Hilda," Duke said, "and she sort of helped me decide. Not that I wasn't wavering, anyhow."

"I guess I'd better explain," Belle said. "Hilda tried to lose herself, but I was able to trace her here finally. But Ma Hopgood had got hold of her just in time to keep her from jumping in the river. Ma's good for Hilda, and Hilda likes Cull Haven, so

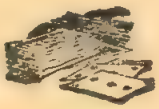
I just left it that way."

"Is Hilda why Ernie came here?"

"I don't know, Duke. He got what he wanted from Hilda, and the baby couldn't mean anything to him. But it seems a long chance that he should just drift here, doesn't it?"

"Ernie's scared of you, Belle," Duke said. "Watch him."

"He'd better be scared of me," Belle breathed. "If I got the chance, I'd sure fix his wagon. But let me turn that around. You watch him, too, Duke. He doesn't come into the High Desert while I'm there, but Tack riders do. I hear things. And what I hear scares me."



ANTE CLIMAX

The cowboy on his trip to town,
May toy with ace and joker—
But let a slicker try and cheat,
The game becomes DRAW poker!

—Pecos Pete

Her face moved forward, and he could see that she was truly concerned for him. Yet, with their glances meeting he was conscious mainly of the deep, intoxicating thing that could come from her so powerfully and reach so deeply into himself. It was a fundamental thing. It was almost the raw cry of flesh to flesh. Yet it was more, and it was the extra quality that had him baffled.

He rose and crossed to her. She caught the hands he would have cupped to her cheeks, but he grasped her wrists and gently tugged her to her feet. She was smiling slightly, a little bewildered herself, yet she let herself go into his arms. Then she let her lips rise quickly, and with his eagerness.

She didn't kiss like some girls Duke knew because there was no reluctance in her, nor restraint, and no quick change of mood. She sighed in a kind of tired satisfaction when at last she turned her face away. But she was still for another moment against him, her pressure a yeasty warmth on his flesh. Then she stepped back and looked up at him.

"I've wondered how it would feel," she said.

"You're a man's woman, Belle."

"Too true. And too bad, maybe."

"Why'd that be?" Duke asked wonderingly.

"Bad for the man, and bad for me," Belle said. "Men want more than I do. Duke, you're not serious, or I wouldn't have given you that. And you'd better go, now. I've got to get ready for work."

"Belle—" he began. Then he grinned and said, "Hell, what can a man expect who just passes out in the prime of the evening." He reached for his hat.

SOMETHING churned in him as he walked back into town, and it was like the turmoil that had ridden him during his last visit here. But the street looked peaceful as he tramped along its length, and he decided that what he needed was a big dose of men instead of women, a couple of drinks and a game. An ordinary cowpuncher's penny ante game. And not in the High Desert, because he didn't want to see any more of Belle tonight.

He made his way to another saloon and stepped in. He found the place to his liking, plain and unpretentious, with a short bar and only a half-dozen card tables that weren't all occupied. A game happened to be forming, the men disclosed in the cone of yellow light from the hanging lamp wearing the weathered, peaked hats of the range. Duke came up with a friendly grin, was invited in, and sat down with satisfaction.

He didn't know how many hours passed, and pleasantly for him, though he seesawed back and forth within the limits of a five-dollar risk. He had his back to the street and bar, and was caught by surprise when a man at the table looked up

at somebody behind Duke.

"Be with you in a minute, Ernie," the man said.

Duke felt a prickling between his shoulders. There was more than one Ernie alive, though it wasn't too common a name. The puncher across the table had a hard mouth, and Duke felt a sudden wonder if he was a Tack rider. Then the man's gaze dropped to Duke and an eyebrow made a funny little twitch. It struck Duke that, from behind, Ernie might not have recognized him. But now Ernie did.

"Well, what do you know!" breathed a voice that was undoubtedly Ernie Griffen's. "Duke Raglan playing penny ante and with only a couple of white chips left!"

Duke pivoted his lean body in the chair and looked up. Ernie was grinning sardonically. He had his hat shoved to the back of his head, his cheeks were flushed, and he patently had had too much whisky. Those spoiling eyes of his, that disturbing grin—they were there.

"Next thing I know," Ernie added, "I'll see you with a tin bill. Out picking it with the chickens."

Duke shoved up. The insolence in Ernie's voice was less naked than the insult on his face. But in that strange, charged moment Duke was thinking less of the money he had himself lost than he was of the clean young face of Hilda Lyon. He whirled up from his chair and threw a punch.

Ernie hadn't looked for that, but he hadn't been afraid of it. He was a bigger man than Duke by physical measure; he was range-hardened where he believed Duke still to be soft. Ernie didn't get out of the way of the punch, which caught him in the belly hard enough to knock out a gust of wind.

The closeby wall held Ernie up. His spread arms pressed the wall and his dropped head straightened. Maybe Duke could have nailed him in that moment, but Duke didn't want it to be that easy either for himself or for Ernie. He watched Ernie's arms come down to his sides, and he saw Ernie's spine stiffen. Ernie stopped grinning, the wiped-away expression leaving his mouth with its natural sullenness. The lips tightened, and he punched overhand with a swift and vicious swing of the shoulder.

Duke bent away from it and drew Ernie forward. Ernie was light on his feet, and they danced and he recovered from that initial jolt. Duke smashed into him, driving a blow into his belly, and that time Ernie went down.

Now the stunned onlookers recovered. They saw it was to be a hard fight, and they cleared a space and grinned at the bartender's noisy objections. Ernie had hit the sawdust on his haunches and elbows, the fall broken by the dust. His face twisted bitterly as he crawled over and shoved himself up on stiffening arms.

He stood for a moment like a puzzled buffalo. His head bobbed to one side and straightened as he scowled.

"Hello, Handsome," Duke jeered. "Too bad this deadfall's got no women to see you getting up off your pants that way."

CHAPTER XI

Death on the Range

ERNIE'S eyes went bleak. It must have reached him that this had something to do with a girl he and Duke knew about, out of the past. Wariness crawled into the hate he let show openly.

He circled Duke, head bobbed, studying his foe. Then he bored forward, and both slammed into the bar. It shook the whole room and jolted the backbar hard enough to rattle the glassware. Then Ernie began to punch, his arms drawing back and chunking forward, the man rising to his toes with the blows.

Duke nearly went down. So vicious, so completely unstoppered was Ernie's assault, Duke could only slide along the bar in his attempt to get away from it. Ernie slugged wildly at his face. He raised a

knee at Duke's groin and once landed a blow that flung Duke backward half a dozen steps. Ernie gained confidence and barreled on.

Duke was ready. Crouched, he met Ernie's rush. The impact as they came together shook Duke but he chunked a blow to Ernie's ear, an overhand and hooking drive. One of Ernie's feet came off the floor, the supporting knee bent. Duke let go a left to Ernie's mouth, felt teeth tear his knuckles, felt teeth break loose. He brought away a bloody fist, but Ernie was going down. Not hard. Ernie curled like a seered leaf and came down as softly onto the sawdust. No man in the room doubted that he had shot his bolt.

He tried to get up and was a pitiful figure of will without power. He stared up at Duke. Blood streamed from his broken mouth. "Damn you, Raglan!" he said, and slumped flat.

Duke looked around mechanically for his hat. Blood dripped from the fingers of his left hand; it came from his own lacerated knuckles. It struck him that the Tack puncher was no longer in evidence; the man had gone. That was queer. A man didn't usually walk out and leave somebody from his own outfit getting the worst of it in a fight.

But maybe the exchange had been from Ernie to the puncher, not the other way around. Maybe Ernie had brought on the fight to tie Duke up. Maybe—alarm ran through Duke—maybe that puncher was beating it out to the Tack with word that Duke Raglan was off his new spread.

Duke walked out of the saloon while the bartender was bawling something about damages. Ernie could take care of that when he came to, since he had crowded the fight. Duke figured on getting home.

It was around midnight, he estimated. His horses hadn't had too much rest, but they would have to go short. Duke knew he could be guessing wild and hoped he was. But he had a feeling that the puncher at the table had received some kind of go-ahead from Ernie. Then the man had vamoosed. It looked bad.

Duke needed less than half an hour to hit the trail, landing a packed horse. Night darkly painted the heavens, with the moon lost somewhere above the clouds. The desert breeze made his sweaty body chilled and miserable, and his hand had started to hurt. But he stuck to the open road, which was the shortest way home.

Dawn caught him on the last half of the long journey, and by then there was a gentle drizzle of rain. By seven o'clock he could see nester shacks standing in lonely distances to the east, breakfast-fire smoke lifting up into the rain. A little after nine he climbed the last rise before North Camp. As he broke over, he pulled down his horse and gave a short, protesting cry.

Willows screened the buildings, but he didn't have to see. Smoke lifted above the trees, the dreary, persisting smoke rising after the climax of a fire has past. Duke dropped the halter rope of the pack-horse, dug in his spurs. The tired horse jumped forward, then was running down the slope, throwing great cakes of mud.

As the land below him wheeled slowly, Duke saw that it was the barn, or what was left of the barn. The structure was gone. The smoldering, the still-rolling smoke, came from the heap of cottonseed cake. The winter's feed, not only for his own steers but for the Cull Haven cut he had taken on to care for. Duke knew he had been all too right about the Tack puncher.

THE house still stood intact, for the barn and its store of costly feed had been the most vulnerable part of North Camp. Mechanically and shocked too cold even to think, Duke rode back, got the pack-horse and took it on in. He skirted the ruins of the barn, which still burned stubbornly even in the increased fall of rain. As near as he could tell, his little herd had not been monkeyed with.

Well, Duke thought, he had licked Ernie Griffen, for what satisfaction that was. And Milt Tews had licked him.

Duke knew he had medicine to take. He unpacked and turned the led horse into a corral. He left the stuff he had brought out on the house porch, then swung again into a wet saddle. He headed for Cull Haven to make his report and take the whipping he had earned himself for his carelessness.

Ma Hopgood wasn't at headquarters, nor was Frisco. Hilda, seeing Duke ride into the yard and apparently sensing something wrong, came onto the ranch-house porch. She was at the head of the steps when he swung down at the foot and for an instant supported himself tiredly with a hand on the swell of the saddle.

"Duke!" she cried. "What's happened?"

"Where's Ma?"

"She and Frisco went over to the nester settlement. There's been trouble there. But you, Duke! Your hand's bleeding!"

He grinned and looked at his torn knuckles. Then he looked at Hilda. She was slim and young; she was clean and good. She didn't need to know that he had squared things a little with Ernie. Maybe she wouldn't want to know that Ernie had had his handsome teeth knocked loose. Women could be odd; they didn't always stop loving just because they'd got hurt. Sometimes they were willing to risk being hurt again.

He said, "My barn's been burned down. Tell Ma when she comes back. The feed's gone. Have to bring her stuff back home."

"Was it set, Ernie?"

"Likely. Tell Ma I was horsing around in town when I should have been home. It's my fault. I'll pay for the feed if I've got enough money. What happened at the nester colony? Do you know?"

In a lowered voice Hilda said, "A man was killed."

"Who?" Ernie thundered.

"The one they call Cotton."

It wasn't good hearing that any man had been killed, but Duke felt relief because he had thought of Burt Imbler. He still had not met Cotton Woody, who was one of the squatters between North Camp and Tack. A bachelor, fortunately in that he hadn't left a family. One of the three men who had stood between the Tack and the main nester colony.

"Shot," Duke said, and it wasn't a question. "Well, you tell Ma what I told you." He swung toward his horse.

"Duke, you come in," Hilda said in a firm voice. "I'm going to fix your hand. I'm going to feed you. Then you're going to get some sleep."

"All right," Duke said, and all at once the last strength ran out of him.

A great deal of the girlishness had gone from this girl, Duke discovered. Hilda led him into the full warmth of the big old house and on through the kitchen. Ma had no cook, no separate mess shack, insisting on treating her crew like a family. He let Hilda wash his hurt hand in hot, carbolized water and bandage it, then he accepted the food she brought, and ate it without hunger. She had been cooking the noon meal for the crew, he saw, and she resumed her work while he fed himself. She was as quick and light and competent as any ranch girl he had ever known.

"Saw Belle," Duke said.

"Did you?" Hilda said, pleased. "How is she?"

"Fine and dandy. Say, I know what I've been missing. Where's the baby?"

Hilda's face darkened. "Duke, I'd as soon you didn't ask. She's with friends. We're—hiding her."

"From Ernie?" he thundered.

"Yes, from Ernie." A flush climbed into Hilda's cheeks, but she met Duke's gaze evenly.

"It's none of my business," Duke muttered.

"Right, Duke. It's something you'd best keep out of."

DUKE refused to stay and rest as Hilda wanted. He thanked her for the favors and rode back to North Camp.

The barn still smoldered and would for days, he guessed. He unsaddled his spent horse, put it in the corral, and went to the house. It was cold, but nothing in the house had been disturbed. Duke changed to dry clothes, then sat down on a hard kitchen chair. He tried to put it together.

Much was open, in plain view. Tews wanted to clean out the nester colony. This fire and the dead squatter were part of that. Hilda had come here a near derelict and had found refuge at Cull Haven, had found healing. Belle had traced Hilda and followed. But what had brought Ernie, and why was he a menace to the baby he had once disclaimed?

Duke couldn't pull the answers out of his own mind. But one thing was clear. He should have killed Ernie or made his try. He could have turned it into a gunfight, just as well, for Ernie had been spoiling for trouble. Somebody would have to do it yet, before the man had hurt more people.

Duke brought his thoughts at last to center on Milt Tews. He was furious and he bore hatred, but there was no sense taking a gun over to the Tack about the barn. Revenge wouldn't help anybody right now, and as far as the law went Tews would no more admit a connection with the burned barn than he would with the dead man. There was nothing to do to get back at Milt Tews that would gain anything. The only course was to block him, and the rest depended on what the sheriff could do about Cotton Woody.

Not even realizing he was growing drowsy, Duke fell asleep in the chair and awakened with a hurting neck and a chilled body. He was unrested and realized at once that it was the arrival of horses and a rig that had disturbed him. He shoved to his feet and went to the window.

Ma Hapgood had come in with Frisco. Duke swung open the door and stepped out.

Ma sat occupying two-thirds of the buckboard's seat and she was staring at the embers of the destroyed barn. Then she swung her massive head to look at Duke.

"So you took your finger off your number," he said.

"I sure did," Duke answered. "Can't even claim it never occurred to me to get somebody from your place to stay here, because it did. I just took a chance."

Ma said, "Come and help me down, Duke. I've sat a hole in this danged seat."

She came down heavily with his help, straightened her skirts, and didn't look too riled by his dereliction. Frisco drove the team on to the corral fence and tied it. He came back, and the three went into the house. Duke built a fire while his visitors shucked out of their wet outer garments.

"Well," Ma said, "what happened to you ain't nothing to what happened to Cotton Woody. Hilda said she told you."

"What did happen?" Duke asked.

"Shot in the back from ambush. Rifle. On his own claim. By Milt Tews' killer."

"I hate to alibi the man," Duke said, "but Ernie Griffen was in town. That's where I got this hand and the bruises on my face. But there's no question somebody else in the Tack's pay killed Woody."

"Your steers all right?" Ma asked.

"Yes. They figured if they got rid of my feed that would get rid of the steers automatically. Has the sheriff come out?"

"Sent for," Ma grunted. "But he'll have a time pinning anything on the Tack. Them polecats'll stand together and lie themselves blue in the face. You had enough to quit yet, Duke?" His glower answered her, and Ma laughed. "Fine. You've made a liar out of Laury Imbler, though. She says your heart wasn't in this

from the start, ain't in anything you do, and that a little tough going will run you off."

"She said that?" Duke bawled.

"Her opinion of you," Ma drawled, "would curl your whiskers. Which brings us back to the feed, Duke. If you're really going to stick, I'll stake you to more."

CHAPTER XII

Wounded Hostage

MA AMAZED Duke. He stared at her. He had heard considerable about Ma from the Imblers. She ran a big spread and ran it well, but never had any money. That stemmed from the simple fact that she was always putting it out on other people. She couldn't afford to replace the destroyed concentrates.

"Laury would be right about me whatever she thinks if I let you," Duke said. "But if you'll put up wagons and drivers to get it from town, I'll replace it myself."

There was a ghost of a smile on Ma's fleshy lips. "It's a deal. I'll get wagons off tomorrow."

It was going to strap Duke, but he felt better. He offered his visitors supper, but Ma declined, saying she had been away from Cull Haven all day. Before they drove off Frisco managed to speak privately to Duke.

He said, "Ma's got her notch in your ear, Duke. But you'll like it. I swear you will."

Duke grinned at him. "You and me ain't slick ears any longer, huh?"

Frisco's return smile was warm and full, and for the first time they were real friends. "But that's only the half-way point with Ma. She don't figure a man's really settled till he's married."

Duke remembered that Ma had already warned him of that, had also hinted that she had plans for Frisco. He wondered if the girl she had in mind was Hilda. Duke hoped so. This tough kid with the wise head and level eyes would be good for Hilda. If Hilda didn't still care for Ernie. Duke was afraid she might, and suspected that Belle was also afraid of it.

When he was left alone, Duke cooked supper. He was going to have to get along without a barn until he got the money for lumber, because he never could cut enough logs on the distant mountains and haul them down here by himself. The new feed would have to be stacked and covered with canvas. But he would have to throw up some kind of shelter for his horses.

That reminded Duke that he still had a horse of Burt Imbler's to return. Well, he'd do it, and he'd do it tomorrow. He didn't care two hoots what they thought of him. When Duke Raglan borrowed a horse, he eventually took it back.

Right after breakfast he struck out for the Imbler claim, riding northwest and leading the pack-horse. The rain had dwindled to a mist that occasionally freshened into a light shower. Duke was a little excited by the prospect of seeing Laury again. He had thought up some things to say to her.

He had dropped into a ravine and followed it a distance and was coming up past a low butte when he heard a shot. It was too distant to alarm him as to his own safety, but since it was ahead, this struck fear into him. His horse needed only the touch of the spurs to plunge forward, Duke dropping the rope of the led horse.

He had not got out of the ravine yet when he heard resumed gunfire, an outburst, and this time with the distinguishing sound of small arms shooting. It was an angry outburst, a half-dozen shots. Duke was slanting up a climb, the butte still between him and the Imbler place. The firing quit except for a trailing rifle shot. Then he caught the muted racket of horses coming toward him. Again Duke brought down his spurs. The horse slanted down now in a full, upgrade run, its shoes striking up puffs of dust.

The rise topped out. Below, not a quarter-mile away, were the unadorned Imbler buildings. But Duke was watching at an angle to his right where two horses ran under flogging riders, keeping to the easier going of the bottom and circling the knoll. Duke kneed his horse just enough to aim himself straight at them. Not until then was he observed. The near rider still held his gun and he chopped down. A puff of smoke showed, the crack of a pistol shot rolling to Duke a second after. Duke returned that shot, swiftly, more by reflex than by reason, and was astonished at what resulted.

THE rider threw the reins as if trying to toss them over the head of his plunging horse. For a splinter of time the reins streamed in the air. Then the rider bent backward and in a single, swift spilling motion went out of the saddle on the far side of the horse. He rolled clear over as he hit the ground, then lay still, belly-down.

The other man was riding hard, straight forward, and had all but disappeared as he clung low on the blind side of his horse. He had no fight in him and apparently no curiosity as to the fate of his saddlemate. The free horse, reins still streaming, had slowed when it felt the weight leave its back, and for some reason of its own had cut into a hooking curve up the slope. Duke swung after it, bending with his horse, and in a moment had the other horse's reins.

He slowed both horses, then rode back to where the man had hit the earth. By then the other rider had vanished on into the ravine. The drums of his mount's hoofs told that he was still riding hard. Duke didn't have to dismount to recognize the fellow on the ground. The man had been in the game in Prineville night before last, and he had brought Milt Tews the word that North Camp was open to attack. He had been shot through the swell where his shoulders met his neck. He was breathing.

Duke bent and lifted the puncher and threw him across the saddle he had emptied. His eyes gleamed in a cold and wicked satisfaction. This was the first tangible gain anyone had made against the Tack. The horse was a Tack horse, and this man's name was on the Tack's payroll. Now let Tews try to alibi the shooting at Imblers', no matter what had come of it!

Duke lashed the man sufficiently to hold for a short ride, swung onto his own mount, and went on toward the Imbler headquarters. He had a tight, sick dread in him, not fully registering until the excitement of his own brush had died down. But he couldn't go swiftly without dumping the wounded man, making it seem an eternity before he drew near enough to the nester shack to call out and be heard.

"Hallo!"

He saw a figure come out of the shack, a skirted shape that carried a Winchester. He waved an arm, then Laury was running toward him, holding tightly to the rifle.

"Where's Burt?" Duke bawled.

She pointed, which was enough to tell Duke that Burt hadn't been home. Then they came together, and without asking he knew that Laury was all right. Her cheeks were pale, her eyes showing the effects of her fright. But her slender body was quick and free-moving, unharmed.

"You got one!" she breathed.

"What was it, Laury?"

She seemed to be having trouble with her thinking. She stared at the wounded man and slowly shook her head.

"They came in here. They must have thought there was nobody home. Burt and Frisco had just left to go over to Cotton Woody's and take care of the chores. They must have thought Frisco was me, leaving with Burt. I wear overalls when I ride."

Rage boiled up in Duke. "They dare to touch you?"

"I'm all right," Laury said. "They headed for the barn. When I saw the brands on the horses I knew trouble was coming. I got Burt's rifle and fired a shot at the barn. They cut out and shot back at the house." She pointed. "They knocked out one of the windows."

A cold grin crawled across Duke's face. "Laury, could you get hold of Burt and Frisco real fast?"

"Why?"

"Somebody's got to get the sheriff over here. But somebody's got to stand guard over this hurt man, too." Duke spoke swiftly, his words beating out. "When Tews hears what happened, he'll want this man. And the Tack horse. But we want the sheriff to see the cuss and his cayuse and the broken window. After what happened to Cotton Woody, Tews won't want that to happen."

"I'll stay," Laury said. "You'll find Burt at Woody's or between."

"I'll stay," Duke insisted. "If there's more trouble, it'll be here."

"I've taken care of myself so far, haven't I?" Laury demanded.

SHE had, and he had done nothing that actually had helped her, and he saw that the hostility in her had not been lessened. Anger climbed in Duke, even though he admitted that maybe he had ridden in here feeling something like a two-bit hero. And had sounded like it when he offered to stand off the Tack while she went for Burt and Frisco.

"All right," he said. "I'll go over to Woody's. And the devil with you, Laury Imbler."

"The devil with you, too, Duke Raglan."

Duke took the shot man to the barn and placed him down on loose hay. He stabled the horse and knew that the Tack could get at neither piece of damaging evidence without coming again under spunky Laury's rifle. A quick look around assured Duke that Laury had acted too swiftly for any damage to have been done the barn. Then, walking out, Duke swung into saddle. Laury had gone back in the house, so Duke rode out.

As he pointed south toward the Woody claim, Duke kept watching the forward distance hopefully, but saw neither the shapes of oncoming riders nor the dust of them. He silently cursed the luck that was going to require him to ride all the way. He knew that Milt Tews would fill the atmosphere with blue smoke when the rider got in to report the happening. Tews wouldn't take long about getting over to Imblers' in sufficient force to get the branded horse and the wounded man. Duke was ready to admit that Laury was kin to a bobcat, but she couldn't stand off the Tack by herself long.

It seemed a great while before he reached the Woody homestead. The place was deserted, the nester's body having been taken to town for an inquest and interment. A couple of heavy farm horses were in the barn, and recently they had been forked a ration of hay. A milk cow outside a pen holding a young calf showed an empty udder. She had been milked recently. Burt and Frisco had been here and done Woody's chores and left again. But they hadn't gone back toward Burt's claim.

Duke rolled a cigarette in scowling thought. It was altogether too far for him to ride to Prineville after the sheriff himself. It struck him that Burt or Frisco might have gone straight from here to Cull Haven, or to any one of a score of nester claims. Duke angrily kicked a clod. Nothing to do but go back and stay with Laury until Burt got home. Remounting, he turned his horse about and began to retrace the long and wasted travel.

The sun stood out in its mid-morning prominence when once more Duke drew in sight of the Imbler claim. The look of complete serenity about the place at first reassured him. He called out from long habit, but particularly because he did not want to alarm Laury. Yet she didn't appear when he rode up to the shack. Duke couldn't see her through the window. Suddenly the complete quietude of the place was alarming, and Duke flung himself out of saddle.

He yelled summarily and was not answered. He bolted into the house and went through its rooms without finding Laury. Nothing had been disturbed, but the quiet, empty rooms cried out a warning. Duke ran in full stride across the yard to the barn. Its door was closed, the way he had left it. He flung it open. Then he

stood there in the doorway, dismayed.

The hurt man had been left on the hay, but he wasn't there now. Duke swung over, knowing in advance that the Tack horse was gone, too. The empty stall gave Duke only a sickened confirmation of that. Duke went back to the haypile and there understood what had happened.

His first quick look had failed to disclose it, but there were strips of cloth on the floor by the hay. Bandage material. Duke cursed in a torn, despairing way. Laury had been unable to let the man lie here bleeding, though the bleeding hadn't been bad enough to worry Duke. She had come here to dress the man's wound. The fellow must have been more revived, then, than she had believed. He had betrayed her mercy and had surprised and overcome her.

The man had taken Laury with him. Laury and Duke Raglan were the only two who knew what the Tack had tried to do here.

Sickness wrenched Duke's belly when he found that Laury's horse was gone from the pasture. He didn't even have to track them, knowing the man would make a beeline to the Tack.

CHAPTER XIII

Pursuit

INSTANTLY Duke hit the saddle, with the briefest touch on the stirrup. He whipped the horse about and sent it on a straight line for the Tack. In a cooler, detached recess of his mind was a warning. In this morning's scant few hours he had become a wanted man. wanted by the Tack and by Milt Tews. He had ought to get help instead of going straight after Laury all by himself. But that would take hours, and he couldn't bear the thought of that long a wait, of that long with Laury in the hands of driving, ruthless men.

It was his first direct approach to the Tack headquarters. He came to a halt atop a rise with the noon sun hard on his left. The buildings sprawled below him, considerable in size and number. Poplars stood behind them, from this point of vantage, and beyond the slim trees the flat bottomland ran to the foothills. The serenity of the place would have lulled a less disturbed man's suspicions. The Tack spread looked prosperous, and seemed a completely harmless layout.

At first, Duke could see nobody stirring below. But the day corral, in a corner of the big in-pasture, showed a number of horses. It was the dinner hour, and a good time for Duke to ride in and make his play. But even as he gave his close and brooding study to the place, a whole knot of people appeared abruptly from the house porch, where they had before been invisible. Two men stalked ahead, three behind. Two of the rearward trio were marching a third figure between them. His gaze sharpening, Duke saw that the one in the center was wearing woman's clothes.

Whipping his horse about, Duke pulled back from sight. Not daring to risk being set afoot here, he tied the reins of his mount to a huge bush before he slipped back to the viewpoint. The squad that had caught his notice had moved to the corral. Now the captive in skirts was struggling with her captors outside the pole fence.

A couple of men had entered the corral and were roping horses. Duke's jaw was so tight that he could hear his teeth grind. But the men weren't going to hurt Laury, not there. She had been brought to Milt Tews, and now she was to be taken somewhere else. It was a break for Duke. He could dog the party and do a lot more good when he found his chance, than he could do by bearing in single-handed on the Tack headquarters.

Within minutes five riders were moving out, cutting directly across Duke's line of vision. Southward lay the first rises of Maury Mountain, then its timbered slopes.

The party set a course in that direction, one man in the lead, another trailing, then three abreast. They were moving at a fast trot, apparently knowing where they were going and in a hurry to get there.

Before they were lost to sight, Duke swung back and brought his horse up again. Then he let them pass out of view beyond a headland. Mounting then, he rode along the rim for a distance, then beginning a long and cautious descent to the bottom. The party he stalked was lost to view from there on. But he cut the sign quickly and it was easy to follow. And risky. In abducting a nester girl, the Tack had laid itself wide open. They wouldn't want to be surprised with Laury in their hands and held against her will. A cattle country could get heated up over rough tactics with a woman more than with anything else—

A couple of miles from headquarters the leader of the horseback party ahead swung on a sudden slant toward the higher foothills. Presently Duke saw what had turned them, when he came to the faint but plainly wheeled-out traces of an old wagon road. It led up into the hills and it was taking the kidnapers of Laury to a definite destination. Duke dogged along.

The road led into a narrow canyon with steep sides and a steady lift. Duke had narrowed down the possibilities of what lay ahead. A road into this tangled terrain, he decided, could lead only to a woodcutter's camp or, with less probability, an outcamp of the Tack.

But the road and the rigidity with which it would have to lead on into the mountain had stirred an idea in Duke's mind. He could do more damage and achieve more success if he got ahead of these men. It would make for rough going, but if he could circle ahead he was bound to come upon the road again, and the party was no longer moving at a pressing gait.

THE rough shoulders on either side of him presented a forbidding mien as Duke studied them. He rode on a while, undecided, still watching. Presently he came to a place where he could leave the road and strike up onto the mountain. Both brushy and rocky, it made hard going for his horse, which already had turned out a fair day's work. But Duke kept on grimly, for a human life was involved. More, it was the life of Laury Imbler and—well, worth whatever the cost of saving.

It was so slow Duke began to doubt the wisdom of his choice. He came into the pines, losing the sun above them and feeling the cool of shadow faintly stirred by a mountain breeze. But still the land climbed, and time was going by much the swifter and urgency began to be an unbearable tension in Duke. Even if he got ahead and gained surprise, he had four men to defeat without too great a danger to Laury. Duke kept going. Then presently, no longer able to repress his pity for his horse, he dismounted and began to leg it.

He figured that he might as well bear back in toward the trail. The land fell abruptly away and let him down easily. The bend of the canyon he had left wheeled slowly back. His high-heeled boots were anything but suited to this work, and the effort of walking brought sweat to his skin and helped limit the depth of his breathing. But he was encouraged, for there was more than an equal chance that he had got ahead of the abductors.

Then suddenly he came to the end of the canyon and paused, puzzled. He pressed forward, reached a rim, and looked down upon a long, narrow but flat canyon floor. It was at least a hundred feet below him, and there were buildings there, three of them shacks and the fourth much larger. A creek tumbled down from a notch above the canyon, and a flume needled into this notch and came out to join the rotting housing of a moss-grown water-wheel. The distant slope showed nothing but stumps, downfall and brush, and suddenly Duke realized that this was an old waterpower sawmill that long had been in disuse. This was where they were bringing Laury!

They were not here yet, and that was at once a satisfaction and a problem to Duke. He was too far away and too high up to make his challenge from this rim. Getting down from the rim with sufficient time seemed impossible. Yet—Duke fell thoughtful. Some of the timber up here had been cut away, and at a distance to his right he saw a single, naked pole that thrust upward. To his sharpening sight it appeared to be guyed with a cable. Naturally he understood that the mill had been established here where timber and water power were to be found together, the road serving for access and hauling out the lumber.

Duke left his horse well enough away so that it wouldn't be apt to warn the oncoming horses. Then Duke broke his way on through the brush to the guy pole. He had guessed correctly. A rusty cable ran down to the bottom of the far slope on a long slant—a highline that had been used to let logs down to the level of the mill.

That was a long way for a man to go hand-over-hand. But if he could last long enough, the cable would get him down. He wished he had gloves.

The guyline was anchored to a huge eye-bolt at the top of the spar-pole. Old cable which had been used as chokers to sling the logs lay twisted below it. It had been necessary to hoist the logs in order to clear the lip of the rim here. Duke's eyes glinted. An old sheave block lay almost buried in the fern and grass. It was big and heavy, but he broke it free from the vegetation, got it over his shoulder, then started up the cleats that made a ladder up the high pole.

FROM the top he saw the men from the Tack just coming into the long and narrow bottomland. Then they disappeared into brush sufficiently high to conceal them for a considerable time.

The sheave was side-opening, and Duke got it hooked on the cable. But the big axle of the sheave was locked tight with rust. The wheel wouldn't turn on the cable.

Despair gripped Duke. There wasn't enough pitch to the cable for the wheel to slide on the wire. Duke's jaw tightened, and he swung out and began moving hand-over-hand, dogged and defiant.

BAR ROOM BANK

ASIDE from a few professional highbinders, the average frontiersman was as fiercely honest as a church deacon, ample evidence of which fact is found in the incident of Lyman Jones' bank.

During the major stampede to Nevada's Comstock mines, the year 1860 brought to that vicinity more than 10,000 persons, including the aforementioned Mr. Jones, who proceeded to open Virginia City's first saloon. It wasn't an elaborate lay-out. Under a canvas roof, Jones simply upended a battered wagon box and to it added a couple of barrels of whiskey and two dozen tin cups.

For some reason the miners took a fancy to Jones and to safeguard themselves from too heavy losses at gambling or otherwise, soon began entrusting huge sums of gold to the saloon-keeper's care. Labeled with the owner's name, scrawled on a paper tag, the heavy pokes were tossed carelessly into an open box behind the bar—such transactions being handled without attempt at secrecy. No receipt was given and none asked.

While Jones frequently had in his care as much as $25,000, it is interesting to note that throughout the many months the service operated, his unorthodox "bank" never experienced one penny of loss.

—Nell Murbarger

He dared not look down after he had passed the edge of the rim. All he could do was stare upward at the sky and that rusty wire that ran across it above his eyes, and twist and swing himself until he believed his arms were being pulled from their sockets.

The strain was mainly on his grip, so that stopping to rest was impossible. And always there was the thought of the Tack punchers breaking out on this side of the brush below and seeing him creeping along the high cable.

Twice he had to fight down a jolting rise of panic. But a kind of second wind came to him finally, an actual easing of the fatigue in his body. The rhythm of his swings helped him; and fortunately his hands, though soon blistered and worn raw, failed to encounter a splinter of wire.

Then at last Duke looked back, and the height of the rim behind encouraged him to look forward and down. He was more than half-way down, and now a fall might not hurt him too badly. He went on with renewed determination until he could safely drop to the ground.

He was behind the tumbling old sawmill and well on its far side. But for a while he could scarcely stand because of the weakness of his knees. His arms and hands were so numb he seemed not to possess them at all, and he wasn't going to be any good with a gun until he was certain of them and their obedience to his will. He would have to press into hiding and rest. But he was on hand, and wished that Laury knew it.

Not knowing which of the buildings they would enter, Duke decided on the low-slanted roof of the mill as a hiding place. He could get up on the wheel box, and then on up. He walked toward it with rubbery knees. The little mountain stream, no longer trapped in the flume, brawled down a narrow tailrace. Duke climbed, his hands sore and still unwilling to obey him because of his abuse of them. But he was pressed flat on the shed-roof of the mill when he heard the horses coming in.

The party rode up to the first shack, and no farther. Duke heard the distant ravel of voices but it carried nothing intelligible to him. He had inched his way to the top edge of the roof but dared not look over for fear of exposing himself. A horse stamped. High up, the mountain breeze made a sighing on the cliff edge and in the pines above.

Then a voice spoke directly below Duke. "I don't like this, Rice. I don't trust Ernie. And to my mind Milt's got no damned business trusting the reptile, either."

"Or Ernie trusting Milt," another voice said. "Where's that damned rope you were talking about?"

"Hanging on a peg in the mill."

The voices fell away. Then, directly under Duke and inside the mill, the last voice to speak added, "Hell, it's gone! That means somebody's got to stay here with the filly till we get that damned Raglan."

"That girl's purty."

"Like to stand guard here with her, huh? Small chance of Ernie letting you."

Duke's breathing had all but stopped. So Ernie was here! From the distance they had all looked alike to Duke. And now fresh energy pumped through him. Ernie had gone far enough with his evil work in this country. This old mill site would be as good a place as any to make a try for Ernie's ears.

Laury's presence and what she could tell of events leading to her being here would pin the deadwood on Ernie Griffen, if not on Milt Tews also.

But Duke, on the roof, dared not move, until he was certain the two below had left the mill. He wasn't sure of that until he heard horses' hoofs pound away from the shacks below.

Duke cursed silently, fearing Ernie had left. But under cover of the racket made by the thumping hoofs he slid to the lower edge of the roof and let himself down to the ground.

He did this with some effort, still exhausted from his trip afoot. At the same time, he had had a few moments' rest—time to catch his breath and regain a little of his spent strength.

CHAPTER XIV

Bargain Refused

UPRIGHT, with the earth under his boots, Duke Raglan pulled his gun. He moved to the old mill's far corner and slipped along the back wall. He pressed his back flat to the boards and slid up to the front corner, and he was slow and careful about looking around it. Except for wild grass, the space ahead was clear for sixty feet. Then came the end wall of the first shack.

Duke walked in a slow and careful stride across that open space. He could still hear the horses pounding downhill.

Moving along the back of the shack, Duke crossed another grassy open space and came to the end of the middle dwelling.

There he heard Laury's calm, clear voice say: "Ernie Griffen, what are you going to do if they manage to bring Raglan here?"

"Kill both of you," Ernie's voice said casually.

"You're cool enough about it."

Duke heard Ernie's high-pitched laugh. He decided the killer must have picked this shack because it was in better shape for his purpose than the other two. This end wall was solid. Maybe there was a window on the back, or maybe the door in front was Duke's best bet.

He considered both approaches. The main thing in his favor was the fact that apparently none of the Tack outfit suspected that there was an enemy within miles. Duke decided on a bold play, depending on surprise and speed. He slid around the corner to the front of the shack and saw a window between himself and the door, which was shut. He bent low enough to glide under the window, then came soundlessly to the door.

It had grown quiet inside. He moved to the door, knowing that he had to locate Laury and put up a fight that would offer her the least danger, and he had it all to accomplish in moments.

Ernie's voice came through the wall again. "You ain't a bad looker, kid. Too bad you're the snooty type."

"Stay away from me, you!" Laury cried defiantly.

"Don't worry. I got more important things on my mind. But you'd be worth saving if I dared."

"Don't bother," Laury snapped.

Duke grinned, and kicked the door with the full drive of his leg. A rusty old knob and lock was all that held it, and the door burst inward. Duke followed its swing, and had Ernie dead to rights! The man was standing, one foot on a chair, and an elbow resting on his knee. He had a cigarette in his hand and had been contemplating Laury with a vain man's contemptuous amusement. He swung quickly around but all he saw was the muzzle of a gun with a dark-countenanced man behind it.

"You've already struck a pretty enough pose, Ernie," Duke drawled. "Hold it!"

"Duke!" Laury cried.

Duke stepped a wide circle, bringing himself around to face Ernie. Shock had taken the color out of the man's face. His puffed and purple lips were parted to show broken teeth. One eye was swollen all but shut, the visible part being only a streak of hatred. Ernie stood totally still.

"Get outside, Laury," Duke said. "They must have left a horse or two. Fetch 'em up front. Mine's on the rim, but we'll get it down here somehow. Ernie's under citizen's arrest. Mine. I seen him commit the crime of forcible abduction. By the time his pards get back here, Ernie's going to be on his way to jail."

Laury slipped out through the doorway. Ernie stared at Duke. Then he said, "Raglan, you don't play penny ante. You're not in this for what stakes the rest of us can see. I don't know what yours are. But maybe I can show you better ones. Maybe I could make this game worth more to you."

"How, Ernie?" Duke said.

IT SUITED him to have Ernie think of him only as a gambler, an adventurer out for what he could gain. He wanted Ernie to talk. There were a lot of things Duke wanted to know. And Ernie was frightened. He was scared enough to try to bargain. He didn't like the gun Duke kept pointed straight at him.

"Well," Ernie said, "if you'd let me go, I could make a lot of money. I'd give you a nice cut."

"Do I leave the lady here with you?" Duke jeered.

"Hell, I don't want her. Take her if you can keep her trap shut. Duke, I'm going to have the Tack and maybe Cull Haven, too. You want in?"

Duke couldn't help staring. "That's a big jump, Ernie. How you going to make it?"

"Easy. Tews wants Cull Haven and the nester colony. He needed me to figure the angles and do the chores. Milt's tough and he's mean, but nobody would call him bright. I made him sign a pardnership paper with me on that new big ranch I'm going to build him. And I got him to make a will—one of them surviving-pardner-takes-all things." Ernie grinned, and though the grin was eloquent, it was not pleasant.

"It might backfire," Duke said. "Maybe Milt figures he'll be the survivor."

"He sure does," Ernie agreed. "The minute he's done with me, he'll kill me quick. But I figure to kill him a mite quicker."

"That all you come to this country for?" Duke asked. "How about Hilda Lyons?"

For the first time Ernie broke gaze. His glance dropped to the dirty plank floor, which he studied carefully. "That don't come into the deal, Duke," he said finally. "That's mine."

"And I don't come in, either," Duke announced. "Step out, Ernie. Time we were riding."

Laury had come up with the horses, two of them. Duke didn't want to leave Ernie in her care, considering how she had made out with the other prisoner. But he had to get his own horse down from the rim. So Laury had to go after it. He described its location, suggested that she go back a distance down the old road before she tackled the hillside. He watched her ride off, aware of the enormous relief in her face, as well as a look of respect and trust such as she had never before given him.

Duke had given Ernie's gun to Laury. The gunslinger looked discouraged, slack-bodied all at once. He didn't renew his plea. Ernie had his own brand of courage and would play out his string.

Duke needled him again. "Funny you never offered to give me back a piece of my own money, Ernie," he drawled.

"What money?" Ernie looked puzzled.

"Something better than twenty thousand you stole from the Imblers' house one day when nobody was home."

Ernie stared. "You kidding?" He meant it. Ernie Griffen didn't know anything about that robbery.

"Then it was Tews," Duke said. "So I'll help keep Milt alive long enough to get it back, Ernie."

"If Tews stole your dinero, I don't know about it," Ernie said. "He wanted to, same as I did. For he was also scared you might bank some of the nesters."

It seemed an eternity before Laury got back with Duke's horse. By then Duke wasn't certain that Ernie's men wouldn't show back in the canyon at any moment, though they had orders to bring Duke Raglan when they came.

Duke put Ernie on the tired horse Laury brought down, simply because the beat-up animal didn't have the bottom left to help Ernie on a get-away try. Duke made Ernie lead out, and he followed, with Laury riding along behind.

The fall sunsine was fading by the time they rode out of the last fringes of timber. Duke figured the best place to take and hold Ernie for the sheriff was Cull Haven, but he didn't know how it would be bringing Ernie and Hilda together. Yet Duke wanted Frisco's help, and Burt's, because the whole Tack outfit was going to be rambunctious when it was discovered that

Ernie and Laury had vanished, and when they had read sign to figure out what had happened.

Duke decided to go to North Camp, hold Ernie there, and send Laury on to Cull Haven.

HAVING done a little covert traveling already, Duke was more or less familiar with this region. Out of the timber, he pointed the party to the northeast, where they were not apt to encounter anybody from the Tack. Ernie, stolid, stoical, rode ahead of Duke. He was not cheerful, but he had not reached the end of hope. When finally Duke told Ernie to pull down, Laury rode up beside Duke.

Duke said to her, "You'll be safe enough between here and Cull Haven. Ride there, and tell Frisco all about it, if he's there. Tell him I'll be at North Camp and will likely need all the help I can get."

Laury's veiled eyes were on Duke a long moment. She said, "If a person hunts hard enough, Duke, certain redeeming qualities can be found in you."

"Thanks," Duke drawled. "When I've got the time, I'll hunt for some in you."

Laury did not look unhappy as she rode away, and the solitary ride across the range did not frighten her. It had been an unusually heavy day for Laury, Duke reflected as he watched her receding figure. Once he had thought he knew women, and could handle them well enough. But as far as that was concerned, there had also been a period when he had thought he knew himself.

"Get going, Ernie," Duke ordered.

They rode on in single file. The land flattened, crested again, then they were on the rim of North Camp's saucer. Slanting down, they struck the bottom and went up along the creek.

"You got company," Ernie said finally, and grinned hopefully.

Duke had already observed the two saddle horses standing before the cabin. Their open presence there had allayed his first alarm, and as he rode closer he saw a familiar figure appear in the doorway. Burt Imbler! Duke let out a friendly yell, and instantly Burt lunged off the porch and into saddle. He cut directly toward Duke and Ernie.

"You seen Laury?" he yelled.

"She's all right, Burt!" Duke called back.

Burt rode on up, looking puzzled but relieved. Duke told him about Laury and all that had happened since morning, as they rode to the cabin.

"Thank the Lord!" Burt breathed. "I've never been so scared in my life, Duke! I got home and she was gone and a window had been shot out, and somebody'd been bleeding in the barn. I hunted high and low! And when you turned up missing it looked like you might have been grabbed together, so—" He broke off, breathless.

Duke wasn't really listening. Somebody else had come to the doorway of the cabin and was looking out with interest.

"Belle!" Duke exploded. "What are you doing out here?"

"Waiting for you to show up," Belle said. She saw the gun Duke held, and her eyes shifted toward Ernie puzzled, but her perplexity was less intense than her brittle hatred of Ernie. "If you're going to keep company with Ernie Griffen, I'm glad you're smart enough to hold a gun on him."

"Sheriff can have him," Duke answered. "You got any idea where that lawman is, Burt?"

"Prineville, likely," Burt said, and sighed. "They held the inquest on Cotton this morning and found that he had been shot. I call that mighty sharp work, when there was nothing but a slug in him to indicate it." Bitterness tinged Burt's voice. The coroner's jury had probably been comprised of cowmen, and it wasn't in the average cattle rancher to worry much over a shot nester.

"It would be safer," Duke said, "to have the sheriff come get Ernie than to try and take Ernie in."

"All right," Burt said wearily. "I'll go fetch him out. But I ought to wait till Frisco gets here."

"I can make out," Duke said. "You bet-

ter not ride the road. They won't want you to reach town. You got shells in that gun?"

"Don't worry about me," Burt returned, as he went to his horse. He looked as tired as he sounded when he rode out.

"Could you lower Ernie down the well or something, Duke?" Belle asked. "I mean to stay here a while, and I don't like his company."

"I aim to set right tight on Ernie," Duke told her.

CHAPTER XV

Six-Gun Siege

ON ERNIE'S battered face was a jeering look. By now Belle must have heard of the fight in town, but she made no reference to it. Duke prodded Ernie into the cabin. He told Belle where to find some light rope, and when she came with it he made Ernie seat himself on a chair and he lashed the gunman there.

"Can you cook, Belle?" Duke asked.

"I sure can."

"Then we'd better eat before company comes and interrupts us."

Assured that Ernie could make no trouble, Duke started a kitchen fire for Belle and showed her where to find the ingredients for a meal. He was curious as to her mission here, but she wasn't going to talk in front of Ernie, and Duke didn't want to get too far away from the man.

There had been a change in Belle. She was tense, yet there was a new placidity in her face, a look that hinted strongly at the end of some inner quest.

She was handy in a kitchen, Duke noted with approval. She was smooth and orderly and knew what she was doing. Better than that, she seemed to like it. Duke felt the strangeness of that. He had first seen her through saloon tobacco haze.

At first hers had been a face like so many other faces, that of a girl obliged to work in a coarse, rough environment, who had adjusted to it and grown a little like it. The men who had heard Belle's voice in all the places where she had worked had responded in diverse ways. Duke knew. Some had been aroused by its low, sexy quality. Others found their thoughts turned backward to years gone and years lost, while yet others had looked ahead with a sharpened sense that the world was not without beauty.

As if sensing Duke's appraisal of her, Belle looked at him and said, "I quit the High Desert. I'm leaving Prineville."

"Where you going?" Duke asked.

"It doesn't matter, does it, Duke?"

"Was there trouble?" he asked.

"No. I can only stay in a place so long. Even a woman has a belly, Duke, and even a woman can get a belly full."

It seemed strange that she would want to leave Hilda, but Duke didn't want to mention Hilda in Ernie's hearing.

"A man?" Duke said. "Once you said you weren't good for a man. That's plain crazy, Belle."

"Is it?" she said, watching him.

Duke wheeled around. Sound had swept down the slope to the cabin, that of massed hoofs driven determinedly. Duke plunged to the door, thinking it was Frisco arriving in a cloud of dust. Afternoon's fullness of light had passed and up the dull brownness of the slope he indistinctly saw half a dozen horses running down on North Camp. But they were coming over the brow from the west. And in the next moment he realized that the Tack outfit was arriving in force.

Duke stepped back indoors and swung up the rifle that stood beside the door. Seeing that, Ernie made a deep and gratified sound. Belle came to the kitchen door and gave a small, disturbed cry. Duke stepped through the front door and pulled it shut after him. One of two things had happened. The Tack had discovered that Ernie had vanished and they had made a shrewd guess. Or else the crew had caught Burt.

The sound was that of knuckle-rubbed washboards as the horses ran on, but all at once it ceased, until the ensuing silence was hollow to Duke's straining ears. He had hoped they would come on and make an open bid for Ernie. He didn't want a fight of it—not with Belle in the house.

The silence was long and freighted, the creek brush cutting the besieging party off from sight. They had an easy thing ahead and meant to keep it as easy as possible. A single shot would drive Duke indoors, then the Tack riders would be free to work in against the cabin.

THE shot came, hitting the logs to Duke's left. Certain now that it was to be a fight, Duke hastily backed through the door. Ernie was grinning broadly. Belle looked frightened, but resolute. Then a bullet hit one of the front windows and glass made its half-musical crash as the pane disintegrated and scattered on the cabin floor.

Duke walked on through to the kitchen, drawing Belle back, and handed her his pistol. There was the one kitchen window, and a door, but fortunately there were no end windows in the cabin.

He whispered, "There's a good chance Frisco will get here with help before too late."

Belle's face was tight as she whispered back, "I didn't want to say it where Ernie could hear. But Laury won't find Frisco at Cull Haven, and probably none of Frisco's men. I know that, Duke. I'd just come from there, wanting to see you, when I got here and found Burt waiting, too."

Duke shut his eyes for a brief moment. Then, gritting his teeth, he reentered the front room and crossed to the shattered window.

The next few minutes made a vise of silence about the cabin. The Tack outfit had scattered, getting in closer and surrounding the house. There was plenty of cover for them—cottonwoods, the ruins of the barn, a couple of rock outcrops, and a patch of weeds Duke hadn't got around to burning off. They would take it easy, Duke knew, not sacrificing more than necessary before dark came to help them. The situation had looked hopeless enough, and now what Belle had said about Frisco had come as a bitter disappointment.

Although he knew the Tack crew would content themselves until dark with idly potting at the cabin, Duke fired a shot at the brush to let them know it would be defended hotly. Like an echo, he heard the sharp, higher report of the pistol he had given Belle, and cascading glass informed him that she had fired through the back glass. He couldn't see her, but his admiration, his feeling for her mounted, and he was glad that the flesh-unto-flesh fever that had been so strong in him was undergoing a change to something better.

"You might as well quit!" Ernie called to Duke.

"Keep quiet," Duke barked. "If you don't want a dirty sock shoved down your throat."

Ernie laughed. There was ease in the laugh, a restored confidence. The cabin walls were too thick for a stray bullet to reach him, and from where he sat he was cut off from danger through a window. Ernie figured he had only to sit it out to win freedom.

Duke turned back to his post. His rage alternately gave way to despair. There was the ammunition in the guns and a small reserve besides, but a couple of hours of shooting would exhaust the supply.

There was Belle. He had to do something better than this. But there was nothing he could think of to do.

A bullet came cleanly through the window and hit the inner wall so hard it knocked down one of the old calendars that had been hanging there. It passed so close to Duke's head that for an instant he seemed to have been stung by nettles the full length of his spine.

Then a voice bawled out in the distance —Milt Tews, yelling:

"Raglan! Turn Ernie out and we'll pull off!"

Duke answered with a shot from his rifle.

"We caught Burt Imbler!" Tews called.

"He ain't fetching nobody!"

It was then that Duke saw the end of hope. Tews couldn't be lying, because he couldn't have known Burt's whereabouts were of any importance to Duke unless Burt really had been taken prisoner.

"Burt ain't going to live long if you don't send Ernie out here!" Tews concluded.

Duke nearly let go a threat to shoot Ernie if they didn't send Burt in to the cabin. But that wouldn't work with Tews. The rancher had needed Ernie and still did, but his present fear was of Ernie falling into the hands of the law and talking too much for Tews' own good. It would be almost as satisfactory to Tews to know that Ernie was dead as it would be to have him liberated.

"What did he say, Duke?" Belle called. "Did they catch Burt?"

"Must have," Duke admitted.

AS IF to force a decision, the Tack outfit cut loose with a heavy outburst of shooting. Duke weighed the situation desperately, seeking one shred of hope. It just wasn't there. With no help in sight, the Tack would have Ernie in time, anyhow. And one of these vicious slugs was apt to find Belle.

Ernie raised his voice above the racket. "He's got you, Duke! You've played enough poker to know when to throw in your hand."

Duke bawled, "Send Burt out where I can see him, Tews! You know I won't shoot him. But you can drop him if I don't put Ernie out with him. Send him forward, and we'll swap."

"Oh, don't let Ernie go, Duke!" Belle cried, but at once she contradicted herself. "You've got to, I guess. They'll kill Burt."

Tews seemed satisfied with the offer. In a moment a figure came out of the creek brush, unmistakeably Burt Imbler. Halfway to the cabin Burt halted obediently.

Duke swung over to where Ernie sat in cold triumph. He began to untie the rope. "All right, Ernie," he said. "The Tack will stand together and lie and alibi and probably get away with what's happened so far. But I'm telling you this—the next time I sight you I'll kill you."

"It's *you* telling *me?*" Ernie drawled.

He rose stiffly when he was freed. Then, with a taunting grin at Duke, he walked to the door, swung it wide open and stalked out.

Duke kept his gun on Ernie until the man had reached the spot where Burt stood. Burt started toward the cabin. With each step he took Duke's breath grew shorter. But Tews had enough to get away with as it was. Burt was not shot in the back, and at last reached the cabin.

Ernie faded into the distant brush. Shortly the sound of departing horses was heard in the cabin.

CHAPTER XVI

"He Knifed Belle!"

STANDING in the kitchen doorway, Belle looked ill from strain. But she made herself smile, and made her manner light.

"Anyhow," she said, "the atmosphere is better without Ernie."

Burt blew out his cheeks and looked at Duke with shamed apology in his eyes. "They were coming here," he said, "and I run spang into the whole mess of 'em. The only place I could be heading was town. The only reason I could be going was to bring the law out. So I didn't figure it was worth a mauling to deny it to 'em."

"It wasn't," Duke agreed. "No harm done, Burt, but no headway made, either. Belle, you're a hell of a cook. Smells like everything's burned to a cinder."

"That's powder smoke," Belle retorted, then looked thoughtful. "But also my biscuits, come to think of it. Duke, it would have been wonderful if we could have got

Ernie locked up. He's after Hilda. Since she won't have anything to do with him, he's trying to get at her through the baby. So Hilda and Ma farmed it out with a nester woman. That got to be too risky, so I'm going away, and I'm taking the baby with me till the trouble's settled. We decided on that at Cull Haven today."

"Hilda won't go?" Duke asked.

"Frisco wants to marry her. And it's what Hilda wants, too."

"Fine," Duke said.

"I came over to ask your help, Duke," Belle said. "Burt's got Laury to think about, and Frisco's got Hilda. But you're more or less footloose. To put it another way, maybe you also should have a girl to worry about, and maybe that girl ought to be me. But only for a few days, Duke. Ma said she'd put a man here in your place. And we'd like you to help me get the baby across the mountains to Albany. Or else to Dallas City where I could take the stage or a downriver steamboat."

"Why, sure," Duke said. "Where's the baby now?"

"Back at Cull Haven."

"And where're Frisco and the boys now?"

"At a nester meeting with Ma."

"What for?" Duke asked sharply.

Burt took the answer away from Belle. "They're getting organized to fight the Tack. It's plain to see nobody's apt to go up for killing Cotton Woody, and that more nesters are apt to be killed. It's Ma's notion we should organize to defend ourselves but not do anything Tews could use as an excuse for an all-out attack on us. So Ma took her crew over, I reckon, to show the nesters they got help on the cowmen's side."

"Then who's looking out for Hilda and the youngster?"

"The cook's there," Belle said. "And the wrangler."

"And Laury, too, by now, I hope," Burt said. "With Ernie loose again, I better get over there."

"I'll go along," Belle said. "I closed shop in Prineville and came out to Cull Haven yesterday, Duke. But I wanted to know if I could count on you. Since I can, we'll get you word as to when we need you."

"Any time," Duke assured her.

He felt washed-out when Belle and Burt rode away through the gathering dusk. The supper Belle had started when the fight began was in ruins in the oven and on the top of the stove. Glass was gone from the windows, and Duke could still smell the powder that had been burned indoors. But the trouble had simmered down for a few days, he hoped. Milt Tews felt secure again, and Ernie had been scared badly enough to be content with inactivity for a time. Duke hoped so. He was beat out.

He slept late the following morning. During the day wagons came with concentrates to replace that lost in the burned barn. It served to remind Duke of the inexorable importance of ranch routine in a cattleman's life, the unending chores and concerns, the dull and lacklustre details on which a rancher's whole financial welfare rested.

THE concentrate was stacked in the yard and covered with tarpaulins. Duke saddled a horse and took a look at his herd.

It hadn't been molested and had become sufficiently settled in the new location that only a few breachy strays had to be rounded up. But the placid routine was good for Duke. It eased the tensions and let him look again beyond the next moments and the risks and urgencies and uncertainties of those moments. He wanted to stay here. He knew that now, and understood why there had never been any real drive in him to find the money that had been stolen from him.

Poker winnings—maybe all easy money—never really took hold of a man. He won it, he risked it, and maybe he lost it again. But a man got attached to something he had fought for, and Duke himself had fought for North Camp. He valued what he had worked for, and he had worked at North Camp. He put merit on what reached his affections and—well, he had grown fond of a few people recently.

He meant to stay. The broad agreement with Ma was that he would sell her North Camp once he had proved up on it, or simply let it revert to her if he threw it up sooner. But right from the start Ma had intimated that she wouldn't mind letting the right man hold onto it. She couldn't prevent it, and Duke could keep the claim legally no matter how she felt, but somehow Duke wanted Ma to feel that he was the right person.

Duke repaired some of the damage to the cabin that afternoon. He would have to get new glass from town to fix the windows, so temporarily he boarded up two of them and scraped up enough cloth to cover another. By evening that was all that was left to remind of the fury and violence that had spent itself here the previous evening.

He went to bed early, but came out of a nervous sleep somewhere before daylight to probe the darkness with careful listening. He bounced out of the bunk when it became evident that a horse was thundering down hard toward the cabin. He slid his legs into his pants and stamped on his boots, and was standing in the doorway with the rifle when the horseman reached the cabin.

He didn't recognize the fellow in the darkness nor the voice that blurted:

"Frisco wants you at Cull Haven, Raglan! There's been trouble there!"

"Who're you?" Duke snapped suspiciously.

"Al Taney. From there. Belle Lyons has been hurt. Bad. I got to go on and fetch the doctor."

"Belle hurt?" Duke thundered.

"That Ernie," Al said tiredly. "Looks like he found out that they took the baby back to the ranch. Somehow Ernie got into the house. Only Belle kept him from taking the kid. The lousy, dirty son knifed her."

"Good God!" Duke breathed.

Al Taney whipped his horse around and was gone. Duke plunged back into the darkened house to finish dressing. He had never seen this rider; he had no proof that Taney had come from Cull Haven. But the man's urgency, his shock, his bitterness had seemed real. Whatever, Duke was going over to Cull Haven as fast as horseflesh could carry him.

He set out, his horse at a long lope. He hit the top of the slope and broke over, then was running on the swaying dip of the higher plateau. Steadily southward and disdainful of the danger that a horse and rider might be lurking in the night. And dawn had not yet streaked the sky when he saw the Hopgood headquarters in the distance. Duke dropped down to the creek bottom, and within minutes was reining up in the Cull Haven ranchyard.

Men stood about, the spread's half dozen nondescript riders drawn from the bunkhouse by the tragedy and useless because Al Taney was doing the only good that could be done in his headlong night ride for the doctor. Frisco came down from the porch, a stocky, boyish figure in the scattered lamplight from the big house's windows, and yet an ageless and burdened figure, too.

"We waited too long, Duke," Frisco said.

"How's Belle?"

"Holding on, and that's all. Duke, I'd ought to of killed that son—"

"Take it easy, Frisco."

DUKE went on up the steps. The door swung open before his hand touched the knob. Ma made a beckoning nod to Duke, who stepped inside. She wore a wrapper, her thin hair was loose on her shoulders, and she looked a million years old.

"Can I see Belle?" Duke said.

"You can see her," Ma said in a gritty voice. "But she's unconscious, Duke. That man all but killed her. He drove his knife into her breast but it was the right side."

Duke saw Hilda then. She was in the living room, in a chair by the library table in the center of the big room. The girl looked at Duke, but he didn't think she knew who she saw. He walked over to her. Still Hilda gave no sign of being aware of his presence. She could only sit with round eyes that were like the glass on a cold stove. Duke turned back.

He moved then toward an inner door-

way. A lamp burned in the room beyond, and Belle was in the bed. She seemed asleep or she seemed—Duke swallowed. He turned back, uncertain and lost and numb. Ma came up to him in her swinging, waddling walk.

"Ernie's crazy," she said. "He threw Hilda over, then decided he wanted her back. She wouldn't even see him. So he threatened to get the baby and make her come to him that way. Somehow he got in here tonight without rousing any of the boys. And he would of got the baby except Belle woke up. Ernie run. But not till he'd done it. Belle was conscious long enough to tell us."

"He was scared of her. Belle would have killed him if she'd got the chance, and Ernie knew it."

Duke walked over to Hilda then. That time she looked up into his face.

"I caused it, Duke," Hilda said dully. "I caused all this trouble."

"Honey," Duke said, and placed the flat of his hand on her shoulder, "trouble starts wherever you bring two human beings together. Trouble of one kind or another. We're made that way. You quit talking like that, kid. You quit thinking that way. None of the rest of us do."

"Belle," Hilda said. "That's Belle in there."

He hunkered down, placed his arm across her shoulder, and hugged her against his side. The shoulder shook, then suddenly Hilda was crying. Duke pulled her face against him with a gentle hand. Then the shock and grief and guilt broke up and she cried against his chest.

Day had broken when Duke came out of the house. Cull Haven's anxious riders still formed a helpless ring at the bottom of the steps. Duke stepped down, stopping beside Frisco.

"It's daylight," Frisco said.

"Come over here, Frisco," Duke answered.

They walked out across the yard. "This has got one answer, Duke," Frisco said. "There never was but one. It's light enough to go over to the Tack."

Duke swung toward him. "It's not yours, Frisco."

"It's mine, all right."

"You're going to marry Hilda," Duke said. "And be a father to her baby. So keep your hands clean."

Duke walked toward his horse. Right now Frisco was held here with the others, waiting for the doctor to come, waiting to learn what earthly help could do for Belle. Later, no matter what happened, Frisco would get back to thoughts of Ernie. Duke saw his own obligation clearly, and did not shrink from it. Ernie at last had lost his head. He had all but killed a woman. It was doubtful that Ernie would try to stay in the country after that.

Duke needed a fresh horse but had not dared ask for the loan of one from Cull Haven, for it would have betrayed his intentions. So he struck out for home at a

slow gait that spared the animal. But beyond sight of the Cull Haven buildings he changed his course to the northwest. Toward the Tack. If Ernie had decided to brazen it out, he would be there with his kind. If panic drove him and he meant to flee, he would make the Tack his point of departure.

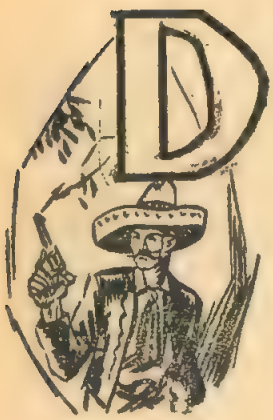
A hunch began to work in Duke's mind as he covered the miles at his slow and patient gait. Ernie would know that somebody had been despatched for Prineville and that the sheriff would be out after him on the heels of the doctor being sought for Belle.

Duke was thinking of the old abandoned

sawmill, which was easier to reach from here than was the Tack. Ernie might go there and wait for a chance to get from Tews the money or food or whatever he would need to carry out his intentions. The hunch was strong in Duke, and it wasn't much out of his way to check up on it.

CHAPTER XVII

For Hilda



DUKE RAGLAN sharpened his slant to due west. The dull morning sun fell full upon his back without diminishing the cold resolve that had gathered in his brain. He reached the end of the plateau and traveled on into the first outskirts of the mountain pines and foliage.

Now and then he halted to let the punished horse rest, hating the delay almost beyond bearing because of his cool but gnawing eagerness to face Ernie Griffen. He had had his chance at the killer and had shown mercy and respect for the rules of decent men. Now it was painted across the sky before him that some men could not be left living.

That was all that seemed to be in Duke Raglan, that one thought. Whatever change it would make in his own life, he was going to better the lives of Hilda and her baby and Frisco, if he could—yes, and the life of Belle, if she was spared. It wasn't vengefulness that carried him steadily on; it was aroused humanity with the courage to enforce itself.

The grade climbed for a time, then Duke came to an upland meadow and let his horse hurry. The cooler upper air was uncomfortable for he wore no coat. But the sky was clear above the meadow and above the pine ridges all about. Duke climbed one more rise and on its other side saw far below the dull shine of a creek. He was in above the sawmill, he judged, and was coming at it from a direction that would not bring him out on that high, obstructing rim.

Now he swung right a little, moving with caution, reviewing the exact situation of the huddled old shacks and mill building. Presently he saw the cliff and its telltale pole and guylines across from him. He inched on, watching his horse closely because it was apt to sense the presence of another horse here and betray Duke's presence. When the animal showed a sudden interest in something below, Duke swung down and went to its head. His flattened hand pressed to the horse's nostrils prevented an unmistakable attempt at whickering.

Keeping the horse quiet, Duke led it back for a considerable distance. When it seemed to have lost its interest he stopped and tethered it. Swinging then, he began his foot descent of the mountainside, angling along the fallaway, getting in above and directly behind the sawmill.

He was thoroughly warmed by the time he came down upon the narrow canyon floor. The entire area was obscured by shadows, it was quiet except for the faint sighing of a breeze and, as he drew nearer, the gurgle of the creek where the old tailrace confined it in a narrow stricture.

He was at the rear of the shacks and on the blank rear of the mill. But, as his movement wheeled various objects into view then cut them out again, he saw a saddle horse.

Duke halted, resting, thinking it out. He had the advantage of surprise, but knew that he would surrender it voluntarily. He had come to kill Ernie Griffen, but not in the way Ernie would kill if given the chance. Yet Duke had one vicious wish in his mind—he wanted Ernie to die not too easily. Not easily at all.

Duke slid in against the wall of the mill on the upcreek end. Many of the boards had fallen off the wall, and he stepped directly through into the gloomy structure. At once he froze and stood still, breathing halted. Something had made a scraping sound in the loft above this level.

That and nothing more, but Duke knew he had made a mistake in judgment. Ernie hadn't chosen the best of the shacks again. Something had brought him over here, and that probably was the elevation of the mill's partial second floor, which would let him watch the old road running down the canyon.

Had Ernie heard him and grown deadly quiet? That would be the extent of it, for if Ernie had seen him coming in from the mountainside, Ernie would have killed him without warning and without mercy.

NEAR Duke was the old carriage of the sawmill, long since stilled, the big saw removed. Impedimenta that had been part of the mill equipment lay between it and the front of the building, where a stairs without a bannister lifted to the second floor. There wasn't much space up there against the roof. It probably had been used for storage and for access to the overhead drive-shaft and pulleys.

There were cracks in the floor up there, and through one of them suddenly could come a bullet, angled straight down. Duke looked along that surface, giving it a close, up-canted stare, then made his decision and moved softly to his right. He came to the back wall and began to edge forward, certain from the upstairs quiet that his presence was known to Ernie. Duke went forward, clear to the front wall, and nothing happened except that he had held his breath so long he could feel his neck tendons stretching.

At the front wall Duke glued his eye to a crack long enough to look at the horse tied to a bush just below him. It wore the Tack brand but that was not a surprise. Duke moved on along the front wall until he was at the foot of the stairs. He had half expected the loft opening, just above now, to be the place where Ernie would wait. But nothing showed as Duke looked up. Ernie had feared to change his position because his weight would make a racket, with only thin boards under him and between him and an enemy gun.

Then something stirred up there. It wasn't much, yet the sound of it registered in Duke's straining attention, the merest creak of a board as Ernie made ready. Duke knew then that this silence was no longer necessary to either of them, that they were as cognizant of each other's presence as if they had been the last two creatures remaining in a quiet world. They might as well talk; they might as well yell as they maneuvered in this effort to kill each other.

Duke lifted a foot and set it down on the bottom step. He put his weight on that foot with careful restraint, then brought the other foot level. There was no creak. He took the next riser with the same caution. That tread made sound, and with its sudden, almost terrifying creak came words:

"Duke, I don't figure it rates this."

Duke sucked in his first full breath in minutes. The slowness, the stubborn inexorableness of it was getting Ernie. This killer, like so many, was a creature of impulses. They rose and swelled and exploded in Ernie Griffen, forcing action with little or no decision, and requiring little true courage or judgment. Ernie wasn't a man who could not die slowly; that kind of death was a horror to him. And he was sparing now with words, and was quiet.

Duke didn't answer. Instead he took another step and wanted it to creak and it did, loudly.

"I lost my head, Duke," Ernie said, curiously dogged. "I didn't mean to cut her. But, hell, she was the only woman I ever was scared of."

At last Duke answered. "Ever sorry for one, Ernie?"

"Duke, you won't believe me. I cared about Hilda. I just didn't want to get married. Then. Later I did. But she wouldn't let me come close to her. That's my kid, Duke. Don't forget that. When a man and a woman's made a baby, it puts something between 'em."

Duke's weight, his lifting body, caused another tread to give sound.

"I handed her the dirty end, all right," Ernie said. "But I tried to make it up and she wouldn't have it. You got to consider

that, Duke. So I figured to get the kid and make her come to me. Belle got in the way. I never meant to hurt her. I had big plans and they're all gone now because I lost my head. That ought to show you I never meant to."

Ernie hadn't changed position. He was at the front of the loft, where he could watch the downtrail as Duke had estimated. Duke was a third of the way up the unbending stairs. Soon his head would lift into view of Ernie. He climbed another step. Ernie seemed done with his strange self-justification, his plea. He was silent and the whole big musty building was like a tomb.

THEN Duke could climb no higher without lifting his head into view of Ernie. Duke removed his hat and slowly shoved it upward, peaked tip of the crown uppermost, the hat moving at a slight, forward angle as it lifted. Ernie's gun exploded three times, as fast as he could trigger. There was his fairness, his own show of mercy. Duke jumped off the stairs, landing on the floor with a tumbling crash. He was sitting on his haunches looking upward when Ernie peered cautiously down. And then Duke shot.

Ernie pitched forward, hit the stairs and rolled to the bottom. Duke lifted upright, himself shocked and shaken, and crossed drunkenly to where Ernie lay. The man had held onto his still-smoking gun but the fingers were slowly relaxing. The shot had caught him under the chin and the up-tearing bullet had done work necessary to the world. Unconsciously and as if distrusting Ernie Griffen even in death, Duke took the gun from the stilled and once dangerous hand. Then he turned and stumbled out of the smoke-and-dust-charged atmosphere.

He stood for a long while by the tailrace of the old mill, absently smoking the cigarette his equally absent hands had made him. He had no feeling about Ernie because it wasn't a personal grudge that had been settled here. But he had a feeling about men and the drives in them and the bewilderment, and it had come to him here that Ernie might really have had a feeling for Hilda and their baby, the feeling driving him the wrong way because he had never been right with the world.

Something louder than the burbling water caught Duke's attention. A look at the Tack horse across the clearing from him showed the animal to be giving close attention down the trail. Duke cursed softly and dropped the cigarette into the tailrace. It was quite a distance from here to where he had left his own horse, a sharp climb.

He made an instant decision, ran to Ernie's horse, loosed its reins and went up into the saddle. He swung the animal across the canyon bottom toward the sharp slope he had descended in coming in. At the bottom of the slope he dismounted, caught the horse by the tail, then hit the animal a wallop with his hat. It lunged upward, and he let himself be helped in the climb.

He didn't look back because he was suddenly in extreme danger. Whatever had brought men here at this time, it was probably some of the Tack crew approaching. One glance would tell them what had happened in this canyon, and the trail would be easy to follow if they chose to take it up. Panting and scrambling desperately behind the climbing horse, Duke saw in a flash what must have rationalized this disruption.

Ernie had gone to Cull Haven expecting to kidnap Hilda's child. He probably had intended to bring it here, and had arranged with some of his friends at the Tack to meet him here at this time.

Duke came upon his own horse, and ground that could be ridden over. But he swung onto the Tack horse, which was the fresher, and led his own.

He rode aimlessly for a time, trying to figure out his best move. He wasn't certain that anybody on the Tack cared enough about Ernie to want to avenge his death. Certainly the man had become as dangerous to Milt Tews as he was useful to him. Probably Tews had had neither side nor sympathy in the matter of Hilda Lyons. But there was no mistaking that

Tews would not pass up a chance to kill Duke Raglan, and this was such a chance. If he could be taken before he could talk to anybody, Duke could be killed in cold blood, with the blame put on the dead Ernie.

Duke was being forced to ride deeper into the mountains, yet he had an idea that his best chance lay in that direction. He struck out for a headland that would give him a look at his backtrail. There he halted because both horses were blowing hard.

Swinging down, Duke rolled another cigarette, lighted it cautiously, and smoked it with the glowing tip concealed by his hand. Then he dropped it in sudden haste, grinding it out with his boot. Far down half a dozen horsemen were following his sign.

HIS procedure came full-blown into his mind. Stepping to the Tack horse, he hooked the empty stirrups to the saddle-horn, then threw the reins back over the horse's head. He slapped the animal hard on the rump and sent it driving forward along the hogback. He had a quarter-mile lead on the Tack horsemen. He heard sound come back to him as the fleeing horse drew away into the distance.

Then Duke followed the tracks of that horse. When presently he came to a patch of shale he quartered to his right.

This action would only tangle the pursuit for a few minutes. Of two sets of horse tracks, a man with a sharp eye for sign could tell which had been ridden and which had not by the depths of the impressions. Maybe the Tack had such a trailer along. The range country was full of them. If one was with the Tack crew it would not be long before they knew which horse had been driven off riderless. But it also would cost them time.

A single rider could cover this type country at a faster gait than could a party. Duke stayed on the quarter from the other horse until, pausing an instant, he could no longer hear the crash of its headlong progress. His ears gave him no information about the men behind. He rode on, coming out upon a high meadow. It was empty, pristine, a moment of beauty in an hour of violence. Beyond this space he came again into timber.

There he picked up an old trail which pleased him because, whether made by game, Indians or whites, it would conduct him through the easiest going. But, sheltered once more by the trees, he let his horse rest, conserving it not only out of kindness but because his own life depended on its endurance. He kept his attention on the open space he had just covered.

CHAPTER XVIII

Flight From Fury

FAR DOWN, Duke Raglan saw the pursuing party at the place where he had fouled the sign. Again he detected six figures, none of whom he could identify at this distance. Duke saw them huddle and gesture, then two men rode after the other horse, the rest waiting. The pair was back almost at once and as plainly as if he could hear them Duke understood their report. That was the wrong horse. And now the two riders, apparently the sharpest trackers, began to circle.

Duke gently urged his own tired mount into resumed motion. His survival now depended upon a shrewd and persistent game of maneuvering in which he hoped eventually to get out of the mountains and to some kind of refuge. The reward could be only the right to live and fight a little longer because the score he had settled with Ernie had no conclusive bearing on Milt Tews' aggressive schemes against his neighbors.

The forest about Duke was growing denser, the trees bigger, and he was glad that the pines of this country were so free of undergrowth. He could study his way and move in comparative freedom, though

he clung to the old trail while he sought another chance to throw dust in the eyes of his pursuers.

Though he waited at spaced intervals, he could hear no more sound of pursuit. He began to think of starting his backward circle in the final effort to escape these hills. But the Tack crew could be thinking of that possibility, could already have taken steps to head him off. Yet to swing in the other direction would be to make an impossible ride on this horse. A final choice, risky, but perhaps the best in the end, was to find a place where he could conceal himself and his horse and wait until the pursuit had passed.

Moments wore on before he sighted a spot in the terrain that restimulated this thought. To the east the sky opened abruptly, showing its cold light. The timber quit over there for some reason, and Duke thought he knew what the reason was. He swung his horse toward this brightness and within minutes halted where the land fell away from in front of him.

All this country had originated in a period of geological violence. He was atop a palisade, sheerly and brutally falling from him. Across was a reddish, cutbank cliff dropping hundreds of feet. At the bottom, Duke knew, there was apt to be a watercourse. This drew him strongly, not only because of his own parched throat but his knowledge of his horse's need for a drink. Moreover, nothing served better than water to foul a man's trail.

The drop on this side was less abrupt than the cutbank, and a couple of hundred feet below was the first of two terraces. A man could lead his horse down to the first one and from there might find a way for the remaining descent. He would be trailed this far but once down or even on one of the terraces he would have an advantage. As long as his ammunition held out, he could shoot at anybody trying to follow, and maybe the Tack would lack the stomach to brave both the lead and the drop.

Not certain of the wisdom of his choice, Duke swung down and led his horse over the lip of the precipice and started at a slow and gradual angle toward the first terrace. The underfooting was dirt and rock, with scattered patches of stunted vegetation. Drainage had veined this so that he managed to dig in the edges of his boots and remain upright, and the dragging horse reluctantly followed, nostrils dilated, eyes large with fear.

It was the horse that made this maddeningly slow going. A few faltering steps, and then it would stop, throwing up its head and snorting and stiffening its knees. Duke cajoled it, he swore at it softly, he begged. But at last he got the animal down upon the first terrace and at once pressed into its concealing brush.

Leaving the horse, Duke seated himself where he could watch his own course down the cliff. It was inevitable that sooner or later men would appear on the rim above. And this was a trap if he could not find a way on down, for by merely waiting up there they could prevent his retreat. He weighed the odds against him and accepted them. That was the pattern of his life and, to his mind, of every life for no man knew what lay ahead. It could be joy; it could be death. A man took his chance.

FROM habit Duke kept an eye on his horse, trusting its sense of sound more than he did his own. But the animal remained hung-headed, beat-up, listless. Either the trackers had grown too confident of his clinging to the trail to have noticed his departure from it, or were relying upon that trail's drawing power to hold him on it.

Time was running on, and Duke began to feel that he had the leeway for a try at getting on down. Rising presently he picked up the reins of the horse. At this point the next descent was too much for a man alone, to say nothing of a horse. But further on the terrain narrowed and the connecting land down to the next level again assumed more of a slant. For the second time Duke dragged a balky horse into a downward climb.

This one went better. The soil was less

rocky, easier for a foot to smash into and take hold. The horse picked up confidence and perhaps smelled water below, for it grew more tractable. When Duke reached the next terrace, he determined to keep going until he was at the bottom of the declivity.

This terrace fell away before him. Its lower end, a quarter-mile distant from the other, gave onto a ledge. The ledge descended and was worn, and Duke realized that game from the water level had used it to come up this far to browse. Elated now, the fatigue seeming to have been swept from him, Duke stepped out on the narrow shelf, once more took up the job of coaxing the horse, and descended.

He had heard the sound of water below before he saw it, and the smell of it helped him gain obedience from the horse. The ledge broke out at the creek bank, and Duke plunged on down through the boulders and sand to the water's edge. It was a wild, primitive area, not often disturbed by men, he guessed. The horse halted and plunged its muzzle into the cold stream. Duke gave it a pat, then stretched down and himself had a drink.

A little downstream Duke came to a place where he could see his point of departure at the top of the palisade, and the drop of it put a tight feeling in his stomach. The urge to keep moving crowded him hard, but this country was too rough and too tough for a man to spend himself without the most careful planning. He wanted to follow the water gap, but before he dared risk it he had to know how exactly his route was known to his pursuers. If they knew he had made this descent, they would try to head him off downstream. To be sure that they knew, he had to see them appear up there at the top.

Again Duke hid his horse and once more concealed himself in the foliage. He made a cigarette and lighted it, but hunger and weariness had taken the taste for it out of him. In spite of himself he turned slack and jaded in the quietude.

What roused him was a distinct shout at the top of the palisade. Flinging a tense look upward, he perceived a man on the lip of the bluff, his arm motioning somebody behind him to come forward. Another man came up, and both held rifles. They had seen the scuffing made where man and horse had gone over. From that position they could easily pick out the first stitching of steps to the terrace below. They knew their man had gone down, but that was all they knew about him.

Duke saw his chance in that. Let them believe he was forted up here for his stand, using the advantage of the cliff that rose between them. Let them be long and cautious about starting down after him. Meanwhile he could follow the watergap down as rapidly as he could travel.

Duke rose to a stand. Plucking his gun, he lifted its barrel high as he eared back, then slowly dropped the sights to line on the cliff top. He was at the deadly distance where a pistol was losing its range, but where a rifle could still work effectively. He squeezed off the shot, heard its sharp, rolling report in the canyon, and saw the men jump back from sight. He sent two other shots after the first one.

THEN he swung swiftly toward his horse and went up into the saddle. The creek brush would conceal him, but the men on top would use their rifles to lace it with bullets. Duke had barely got moving when they started it. He instinctively bent on the horse's back. The marksmen on the rim pumped their rifles as fast as they could work them, probing the creek brush back and forth, ahead and back.

Miraculously, rider and horse escaped that vicious hail of lead. Duke had reholstered his gun. He was leaving them a puzzle they would have to pick apart before they did anything more than waste lead. They could decide whether he had got away or had been potted. Then only would they choose the man to start down the cliff first.

It seemed a long time to Duke before he had a headland between himself and the Tack crew so that he dared ride openly.

But he was well ahead of the game now, and the tough going of the narrow, primitive gorge looked negligible.

His elation was a gust of fresh energy for a mile or more, then it began to die. His horse was going to quit, though he had no censure for the faithful beast. Duke had been walking for a while, picking his way and leading the horse. But in hard riding and load-carrying the animal had spent itself long since, had entered the treacherous depths of subexhaustion, and all at once it simply refused to budge.

Duke pinned up the stirrups and reins, rubbed the horse's nose and walked on. The horse would rest, then graze and drink, and eventually would make its way back to familiar haunts.

In this gut of the deep-cut creek, the going for Duke was a little easier, for he could go where the horse could not. But when he had come out into the foothills he would have the wide and open range about him, and it was not at present friendly country for him. Then he would need a horse, and this was a nagging worry as he trudged on.

Presently one side of the canyon began to fall away from the creek, though the hill on the other side still rose sheer and sharp. This was gain, for now he could leave the boulder-strewn creek bed with its crosshatching of downfall, its choking brush and tumbled waterfalls.

Then it began to rain.

By then both sides of the canyon were falling away from the creek a little, a sign that he would soon be out of the deeper mountains. His clothes were soon soaked, and as the chill seeped through him, Duke began to understand that he had to rest. He came to a place that seemed promising, where a single pine stood on the canyon bottom, its thick boughs as yet an efficient umbrella. He moved in under the boughs and all but dropped in his weariness. He settled himself with his back to the tree-trunk, facing down canyon, because if danger appeared it would probably be from that direction.

Drowsiness climbed up through his body and touched his mind. Duke started to roll a cigarette but his papers were wet and soggy. Shrugging, he let go for an instant, feeling his head tip forward. . . .

When he opened his eyes it was with an explosive sense of panic. The rain still churned steadily, and its sound had covered the small racket of the quietly oncoming horses. He saw the animals first, out from this tree, then he came fully awake and saw men about him. Two of them had him squarely covered with hand guns. Beyond was Milt Tews.

Duke could only sit there, giving them a dull stare. "You get around," he said.

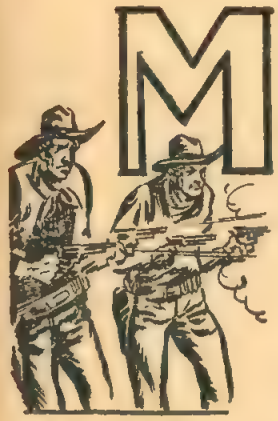
"You had to come down through here," Tews answered. His voice was taunting. "You run a man a fast chase, Raglan. Damned if you don't."

"Now what?" Duke said.

"We'll be getting on," Tews said. "It's wet and lonesome here."

CHAPTER XIX

Nester Triumph



MOTIONING for Duke to come out, Tews looked at the men about him. To a runty individual, he said, "George, you can swing up behind Hjalmer and ride double. We ain't got time to drag this pooped huckleberry all the way in. Leave him have your horse. And you, Raglan—leave me have your gun."

Duke stood still while Tews came in and took the gun. Bitterness ran in Duke Raglan in that moment. He had made a hard fight and all but won it, then had let a moment of drowsiness trap him in the unawareness of sleep. He saw his gun leave holster in Tews' hand, and he saw it slipped beneath the bellyband of Tews' pants. Then he mounted the horse that had been freed for him, and was so steadily watched he could do nothing but obey orders.

A man rode out in the lead, with Duke following. Tews and the remaining men brought up the rear.

Presently the canyon began to thin again until once more the sheer walls hugged the creek. But the Tack men seemed to know the country, which had helped them in heading off Duke successfully. They took a game trail that led them up across a long, conifered knoll, then dropped again. When they came down, Duke understood where he was being taken. All along he had been on the upper reaches of the creek that ran past the old sawmill. He was coming full circle.

They were almost down upon the mill. Duke's jaws bit together. Twice before he had been here, and twice he had been successful in his purpose. A man couldn't expect any better luck than that. This third visit was just one too many.

When the party rode in through the small open space between the old mill and the three decaying shacks, the riders stopped in a wet huddle. The pelting rain brought a steady drumming from the old roof and ran in brown streams over the uneven ground.

Tews said, "We'll put a quick end to it. Gyp, we'll leave him here with you, and you know what to do with him."

A man straightened in the saddle. He was whiskery, cold-eyed, but he also was frowning suddenly. "I ain't Ernie, Milt."

[*Turn page*]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET

MAKES EVERY PIPE A PIPE OF PEACE!

IT CAN'T BITE!

SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE. STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF. AND NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL IN YOUR PIPE.

It costs no more to get the Best!

Tews looked about and saw the same refusal on the other faces. Anger clouded the rancher's eyes. "This is where Raglan's got to die," he said in a gritty voice. "Where the law'll chalk it up to Ernie."

Gyp grinned. "Then maybe we better leave you here with Raglan, Milt."

"All right, damn you!"

"Hold it!"

Duke was no more surprised by the voice that roared out from somewhere than were the men about him. Gyp, bending low on his horse's back, dug in his spurs. A gun cracked wickedly somewhere behind Duke, and Gyp spilled from the horse.

"Duke, hit cover!" the voice of a hidden marksman bawled.

Duke didn't need a second invitation. He knew this voice, though it was a different one—Frisco's—and he had been certain the first one had been Burt's. They were in the loft of the old sawmill, where Ernie had waited! Duke all but rolled off his horse, landing in the soft mud. The others were driving forward, on past the shacks.

"There's only a couple of 'em!" Tews bawled. "Stand and fight!"

Duke saw his chance and bolted for the old mill, but on the way he grabbed Gyp's gun. Gunfire was crackling everywhere as he got past the sagging door and into the mill's murky interior.

"Come on up, Duke!" Burt bawled.

Duke ran past the body of Ernie, where he had left it on the lower floor. He pounded up the stairs. There was only Frisco and Burt up above, but Duke had never been happier to see men in his life. Each had taken an opening where a board had fallen away from the wall. Duke joined them wordlessly.

THIS was the big showdown with the Tack. Tews' men weren't trying to get away; they had dug in and were putting up a vicious fight.

"How in hell—" Duke began, but a bullet ripped into the board by his head and he halted.

"You left sign," Burt called back. "We followed it here and found Ernie. Couldn't figure what happened to you, but it looked like Ernie'd come here to meet somebody, after he tried for Hilda's young 'un. So Frisco and me hid our cayuses and set here to wait for whoever it was."

"How's Belle?" Duke called.

"Holding on."

The bitterness, the despair had gone from Duke, taking with it much of his exhaustion. Yet he fully appreciated the gravity of this present situation. Milt Tews was aware that two men had listened to him calmly announce his intention of killing a man in cold blood. His riders had condoned that intention, had not objected to the crime. So none of them could leave this place until they knew that the eavesdroppers, as well as Duke Raglan, were silenced. This, Duke thought again, was it—the make-or-break situation.

The Tack men had dismounted, leaving their horses in the cover of the shacks. The near shack angled enough that at least one man had got in through the back door and was shooting out through a crack. They would all be there soon. But when they tired of that, they would have to make a bold rush across open ground.

Through one of the cracks in the shack wall a flame could be seen. Duke fired at it, Gyp's heavy gun bucking in his hand. It brought on a savage exchange in which the shack window was smashed. Frisco and Burt were pouring lead against that wall. Tews bawled something unintelligible but which was clearly intended to buck up his men, to encourage them to get on and finish it. Bullets tore into the boards on the mill wall. Duke saw the shadowy shape of a man through the now glassless shack window and shot at it. Then something cut upward into his shoulder with the impact of a hard-swung maul.

Duke closed his eyes and let his head sink down. He didn't pass out, but all at once was rendered helpless. He forgot all enemies except the black one trying to draw a curtain across his vision, his mind. Somebody must have seen him go limp, for an encouraged shout rang out below.

He heard Burt or Frisco give a short, sighing groan. Every gun in the country seemed to be going off then.

"Here they come!" Frisco sang out.

Somehow Duke worked the paralysis out of his mind and gunhand, for that was all he wanted before he left this world. Men charged across the opening and he emptied his gun and heard Burt and Frisco emptying theirs. Then Duke had to let go, but not before hearing a shout of triumph from Burt:

"I got Tews, Frisco! And the rest are lighting a shuck. . . ."

It was an odd, bewildering experience. Duke was drifting, he was sinking, and again he was being lifted skyward on a cloud. There would be intervals of blackness, and again he would have those impressions with a strong familiarity to them.

Then came a point where he opened his eyes to find a girl in the room with him, a girl in a plain, cheap dress that nonetheless lent her the look of royalty—a pretty, a lovely girl with sable black hair. Laury. That set him back a long way.

"It never happened," he groaned. "All that fussing, and it was only a dream."

"What, Duke?" Laury's soft voice asked.

"The business," Duke muttered. "I'm right back where I started out."

BUT there was a difference. Laury wasn't distant now; that was sure. She eased herself gently onto the edge of his bed; hers, really. She placed a warm, soft hand on Duke's forehead.

"What's wrong with that?" she said.

Not a thing, as long as she was willing to keep her hand there and smile at him.

"Burt and Frisco?" he managed to ask.

"Frisco got nicked in the arm. Burt wasn't hit. They brought you here. The trouble is over, Duke. Tews is dead and so are the worst of his men and the others hit for the hills."

"And Belle?"

"She's going to get well, Duke," Laury said. "What's more, she's going to be my sister-in-law."

"Belle?" Duke gasped. "Belle and Burt?"

Laury nodded, and she looked pleased about it.

"They're going to live here. And it'll be Frisco and Hilda at Cull Haven."

"That sort of leaves you a slick ear, don't it?" Duke said.

"No range, anyhow," Laury admitted. She rose and went to the dresser. Pulling open a drawer, she rummaged within, then extracted something. She turned with it.

"Good grief!" Duke gasped. "My money belt and coin purse!"

"I lied to you," she said. "I only hid them. It was you who decided they'd been stolen, Duke. I only said they were no longer where you left them."

"You fooled me!" Duke thundered. "Why in tunket—"

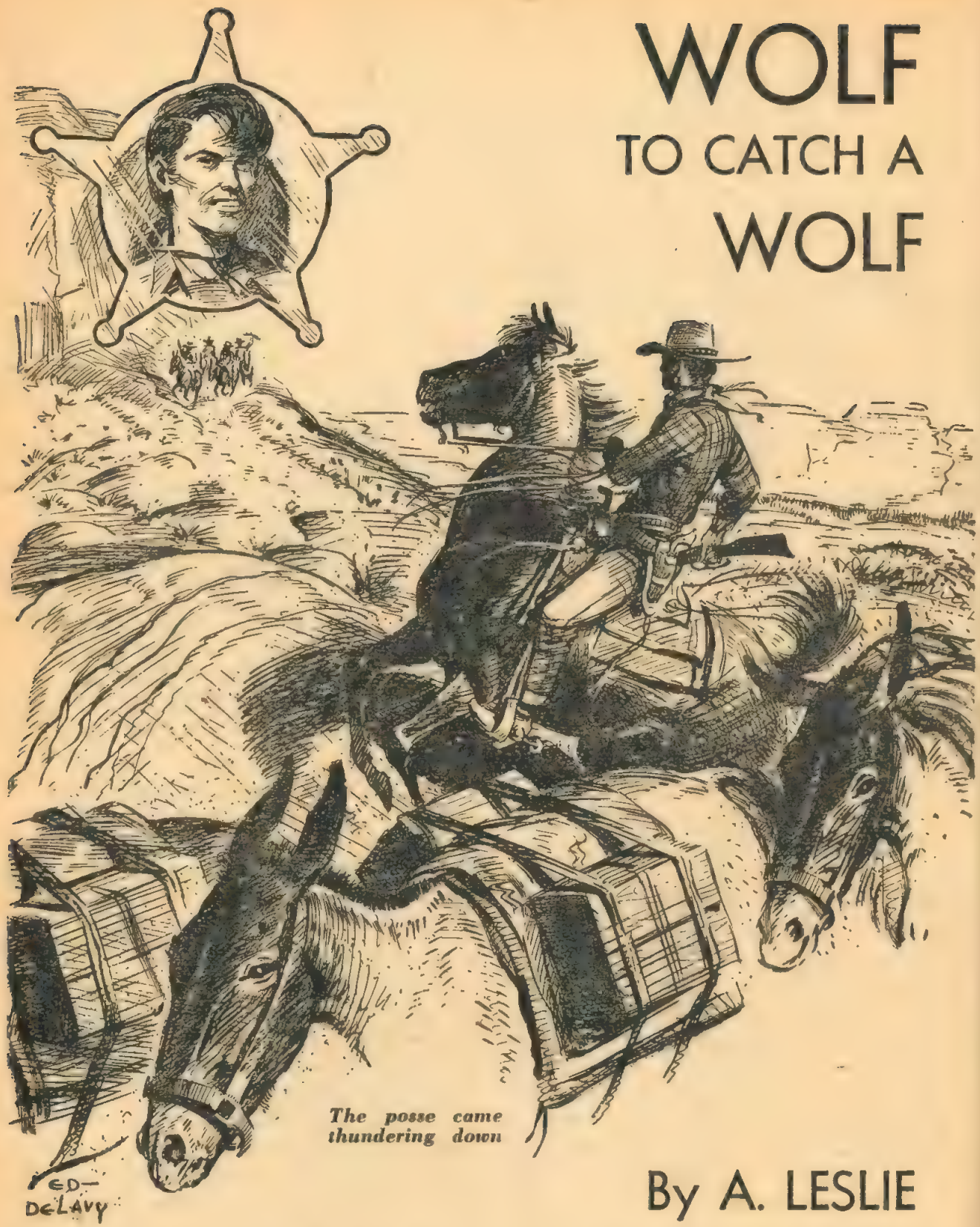
Laury's face was as grave as it was proud. She looked full into his eyes. "I'll tell you why in tunket. When I love a man, he'll have every bit of me. If there's anything he needs or wants that I can offer, he'll have it. If I have it or can get it or earn it or steal it for him. And I want him to feel the same way—that I'm worth working for."

Duke looked at the money, then he looked back into Laury's shining eyes. "Put it away again," he said. "Maybe it'll come in handy some day. Right now we don't need it. I'm going to stay at North Camp in spite of high water and Ma Hopgood. I'm going to start with what I've got, and I'm going to zoom."

"You'll get no trouble from Ma, Duke," Laury said. "She's washed her hands of North Camp. She says she's found the right man for it, though that's not the way she put it. She said she'd found the right —the right couple."

Duke shut his eyes, sighing contentedly. He hadn't gone to sleep, though he looked it. Sure enough, it happened. He felt the warmth of her breath on his cheek, then the warm, gentle touch of her lips. Then, quite as if the old Nick had got into her, her lips pressed hard. She could no more help it than he could the day she got so angry. He opened his eyes, beaming, then they both closed them together. ● ● ●

WOLF TO CATCH A WOLF



The posse came thundering down

By A. LESLIE

THE greatest metropolis the world has ever known was built in West-central Texas. Two hundred and fifty miles long, one hundred miles wide, it accommodated four hundred million inhabitants over its sixteen-million-acre expanse.

The inhabitants of this vast "city"

Miller proves that nerve and savvy are where you find them!

are great talkers. They sit in front of their homes and chatter incessantly. When an enemy appears their jovial conversation changes to hard swearing and yells of warning.

Gentlemen of science, who have a fondness for tongue-twisting words, named the inhabitants of the city Cynomys Ludovicianus. Other gentlemen, not addicted to science, but with a penchant for growing such things as grains, vegetables, cows and sheep, call these urbanites things that would not look well in print.

The inhabitants of Cynomys are good engineers and capable builders. Their "houses" are warm and dry and impervious to ordinary floods caused by an excess of rainfall.

The typical citizen of Cynomys is amiable, cheerful and plump. His golden-brown body is about a foot in length. He has short ears, a short vivacious tail, bright eyes and powerful feet especially equipped for fast and extensive digging. He is locally known by the misnomer, prairie dog, although he has no more dog about him than a squirrel. He is really a rodent and a particularly voracious one, having an appetite better suited to an animal twice his size. Green vegetation is his dish and in times of drought he will eat grass, roots and all. This does not endear him to owners of livestock.

A typical prairie dog hole goes almost straight down from ten to twenty feet. The burrow runs horizontally for about an equal distance. Off the horizontal tunnel are side chambers. The mouth of the burrow is protected against surface water by a funnel-shaped mound about a foot high. In its underground lair, the prairie dog is safe from such enemies as hawks, eagles and coyotes.

Coyotes are particularly fond of prairie dog meat, and are highly ingenious in their methods of obtaining it.

Sheriff Arch Ray and his young deputy, Pete Miller, were riding along the western fringe of the great prairie dog town, watching with interest the cavorting of the little animals. Overhead the sky was dark and threatening. Lightning flashed and thunder rolled and it did not take the acumen of a weather prophet to tell it was going to rain and rain hard.

"Better be gettin' our slickers on," observed Ray. "When she comes she's goin' to be a reg'lar gulley-washer. We're in for a wettin', but it don't matter much, hot as it is. Chances are it'll cool the air a mite and that will help. Look at the dogs, they know it's comin'. They're almighty nervous."

"Uh-huh, and over there is something else to make them nervous," observed Miller. "Say, what does that darn wolf figure to do? Does he think he can dig down to the bottom of a prairie dog hole? He must be plumb loco."

OLD ARCH followed the deputy's pointing finger and saw the lean, bushy-tailed form of a coyote industriously scratching at the rim of a dog hole down which its owner had scurried at first sight of his mortal enemy.

Ray pulled his horse to a halt and chuckled.

"Watch, now," he said. "You're goin' to see somethin' plumb interestin'. I've seed it before. It'll show you how tarnal smart them little wolves are."

"What's he going to do?" asked Miller.

"He's goin' to get himself a prime surroundin' of chuck," chuckled Ray. "Uh-huh, that coyote is goin' to enjoy a helpin' of prairie dog soon as the rain gets goin' good."

Miller stared at the coyote. He saw that there was a method to the apparently aimless scratching and pawing. The coyote was tearing down the crater-like mound that surrounded the mouth of the burrow and protected it from surface water. In fact, he was doing more, he was pawing the loosened earth into a rough V-shaped dam, the open end of which pointed uphill. The sides of the dam completely enclosed the mouth of the burrow. The coyote sat back on his haunches, ran out his tongue

in a toothy grin, and waited. All around, prairie dogs stormed and chattered.

Down came the rain, a regular fence lifter all right. It rained pitchforks and saw-logs for handles, horned toads and rocks to kill 'em with! Soon water was pouring down the slope in a torrent.

But the two naturalists on horseback were too interested in what was going on in prairie dog town to really notice the downpour. Water deflected by the sides of the crumbling dam was cascading down the burrow denuded of its protecting rim.

A prairie dog hole has a roomy side tunnel not a great distance below the mouth, where the owner can remain clear of water going down to the bottom of the burrow. But it was not built against such a miniature Niagara as was pouring into it at present. The coyote licked his lips and waited.

The shower began to slacken. Miller and Ray saw a drenched prairie dog come scrambling out of the hole for air. The equally drenched coyote lunged forward. A single snap of his jaws and the city of Cynomus was short one. The coyote trotted off to enjoy his meal in privacy.

"Well, I'll be darned!" ejaculated Miller. "If I hadn't seen it I would never have believed it. Those little wolves have plenty of savvy."

"They have," nodded the sheriff as he gathered up his reins. "I could tell you a heap of yarns to show how smart coyotes are. Folks don't give wild critters credit for the brains they have. It would be a heap better for them if they did. I had my life saved once by a bluejay dartin' and swearin' over a bush where a drygulcher was holed up. That jay sure was raisin' heck and I thought it looked funny."

"What did the drygulcher do?" Miller asked curiously.

"He died," said the sheriff.

Miller chuckled. Further explanation was unnecessary.

"And a wild pig—a *javelina*—did the same thing for me once, too," continued the sheriff. "He come bustin' out of the brush squealin' like mad. I knowed darn well somethin' had scairt him. There had—two somethin's, holed up and waitin' for me to come along."

Miller did not inquire as to the fate of the two somethin's. Knowing that Sheriff Ray could dot the eye of a lizard at thirty paces with his old single-action Smith & Wesson, the answer was obvious.

"Learn to watch the critters, son," said Ray. "They'll teach you plenty, and they'll give you a helpin' hand when you least expect it. Be chary of killin' 'em when you don't have to. Most all of 'em, even the most ornery, will be your friends if you just give 'em a mite of a chance."

MILLER nodded soberly. The young cowhand, newly appointed a deputy sheriff, had a great respect for the old peace officer and knew that when Arch Ray talked, it paid to listen.

"Well, let's go," said the sheriff. "We've got a couple of hours' ride ahead of us yet. That shower did cool things off a bit." He glanced at the westering sun showing through the clouds and spoke to his horse. He and his deputy rode south by west at a good pace.

At the same moment another coyote was riding a little frequented trail some ten miles to the west of Angelo, the town for which Ray and Miller were headed. This coyote was a gentleman locally known as Wolf Larsen, who had been making trouble in the section for some time. Sheriff Ray earnestly desired to meet up with Wolf Larsen. But Larsen, with the cunning of his namesake had so far eluded Ray and other sheriffs, to say nothing of gentlemen who wore white hats on their heads and silver stars set on silver circles on their shirt fronts—the Texas Rangers.

Larsen was a plumb smart owlhoot and a salty one. He had robbed banks, rustled cows, committed a few choice murders and even stolen horses. Riding

with him at the moment were seven other hellions as ornery as himself and pacing him in everything except brains. South of the well traveled trail that ran from Angelo to Berton, thirty miles to the west, Larsen and his bunch made camp.

Sheriff Ray and Miller arrived in Angelo shortly before dark. They changed to dry clothing, enjoyed a meal that would have made the coyote-engineer of the prairie dog town envious, had a couple of drinks and a few hands of poker and went to bed to sleep the sleep of the weary and just. Wolf Larsen, although there was nothing just about him, also slept well with his saddle for a pillow. Daylight found him and his bunch up and doing.

The stage for Angelo and the railroad left Berton two hours before dawn, under a bright moon, and carrying a heavy load in the boot for even the six mettlesome horses to drag over the hills. The freight was destined for the morning train out of Angelo and the stage officials were anxious to get it off their hands.

Old Lark Purdy, the driver, gathered up his reins, settled himself comfortably on his high perch and whooped to his horses. The shotgun guard cradled his dismally formidable weapon across his knees and lit a cigarette.

Not that either he or Purdy figured the shotgun would be needed this trip to protect the treasure the stage carried. The treasure was in the form of silver with a high gold content. As a safety precaution, the stamp mills cast the silver in hundred-pound bricks, which were not exactly easy to pack off. There were eight of the bricks, all told, their value running into an interesting number of thousands of dollars.

The stage had but a single passenger this trip, a cheerful young Mexican *pastor*—shepherd—who was going to Angelo on an errand for his employer. The *pastor* had celebrated a mite in Berton during the night and was tired and sleepy. He was accustomed to sleeping on hillsides and under bushes, while tending his flocks, and the stage floor between the seats provided what he considered a comfortable bed. He curled up like a puppy and slept like one as the stage climbed slopes and rushed down sags.

Full daylight found the unwieldy coach lumbering through a region of groves and dense chapparal and approaching the little used Ladrone Trail that slithered up from the southwest to join the Angelo Trail.

HERE there was ample evidence of the fury of yesterday's storm. Broken branches littered the trail. Twice the guard had to descend and remove an obstruction before the stage could proceed. As they careened around a bend just west of where the Ladrone joined the Angelo, old Lark swore with exasperation. Lying across the track was a sizeable fallen tree.

"It'll take both of us to move that one," he growled. "I'll pull over to the left and we'll swing the butt around to let us pass. Better rout out that feller in the coach to lend a hand."

Lark veered the stage until the wheels were raking the bristle of growth on the left, pulled to a halt and started to climb down from the seat.

There was a rustle in the growth to the right and a group of masked men stepped into view, guns leveled at driver and guard.

"Elevate!" bawled a squat, thick-set individual.

Without an instant's hesitation, the guard threw his shotgun to his shoulder and pulled both triggers.

One of the owlhoots slewed sideways as if struck by a giant fist, his face blown off by the double charge of buckshot. A second yelled shrilly as a stray pellet nicked his flesh. Then the air rocked and quivered to the roar of six-shooters. Guard and driver thudded to the ground, riddled by bullets.

The Mexican *pastor* heard the owlhoot leader's shout and the boom of the

guns. He gulped in his throat and lay rigid for a moment. But he was by blood mostly stolid mountain *Indio* and not given to panic. Cautiously he opened the left door a crack. A bristle of thick growth within arm's reach met his gaze. He slithered through the opening and into the brush as swiftly and as silently as a snake. He eased back a few feet and stood up, listening and peering, poised for instant flight.

Through a rift in the growth he saw several of the cursing outlaws climb to the boot and begin tumbling the silver bricks to the ground. Others led a string of pack mules from the brush and loaded the ponderous bricks into rawhide pack sacks, two bricks to the mule, balancing the pack sacks on either side. Their dead companion was roped to a horse's back. They left the slain guard and driver where they had fallen. Then they mounted horses led from the brush and disappeared from sight down the Ladrone Trail.

The young *pastor* waited until the clicking of hoofs had died away in the distance. He glided from the brush, cut the traces of the off leader, mounted it and flogged it to a gallop.

Sheriff Ray and Deputy Miller were in the sheriff's office when the lathered and blowing stage horse slithered to a halt in front of the building.

The sheriff swore bitterly as the Mexican youth tersely told his story.

"And the one who was givin' the orders was short and wide, eh?" he asked. "That was Wolf Larsen, sure as blazes. Couldn't have been anybody else, the blankety-blank! Poor old Lark Purdy. I knowed him for twenty years. Pete, we'll drop a loop on that sidewinder this time. Because of this fine young feller here we get a break. Them mules will be loaded heavy and the hellions will think they got a head start, with Lark and the guard both done for. They won't hustle and with luck we'll catch 'em before they get to their hole-up, wherever that is. Seven of 'em you said, son? We'll need two or three more men."

"The two Curtis boys just rode in from the Triangle Dot," said Miller. "They're over to the Ace-Full."

"Good hands, and they're always ready for anything," said the sheriff. "I'll get 'em and a couple more fellers while you get our horses ready, Pete.

"Sure you can come along with us, if you want to, son," he answered the *pastor's* request to join the posse. "Glad to have you. Saddle a horse for him, Pete—the big roan. You go with Pete and help get the rigs on them cayuses, son. Here's a gun and a belt for you."

In less than twenty minutes, the posse, six in number, thundered out of town with a crowd of angry and excited citizens watching their departure and shouting encouragement.

At the scene of the holdup they paused to breathe their mounts. The stage horses were contentedly browsing on leaves and twigs. The bodies of the driver and the guard lay motionless in the dust.

"Poor fellers," said the sheriff. "They never had a chance. Well, there's nothin' we can do here. The coroner and some of the boys are ridin' out to pick up the bodies and bring in the stage. You say the varmints headed down the Ladrone, son? Let's go."

FOR miles they followed the twisting Ladrone Trail, riding at a fast pace. At first the track of the fleeing outlaws was easy to follow, the ground being soft. But after a while they got beyond the extent of the rain storm of the day before and their troubles began. The surface of the trail was hard packed and stony, and left scant evidence of the owlhoots' passing. To make matters worse a hard wind was blowing from the south, raising clouds of dust that almost obliterated what few marks horses and the laden mules had left.

Here the young *pastor* rendered invaluable assistance. Accustomed to searching out woolies straying over stony and brush grown pastures, his eyes were keen as a hawk's. He uner-

ringly searched out faint traces his companions would have passed over.

This was highly important, for the Ladrone, used for many years by smugglers, rustlers and other hole-in-the-wall gents, had many branches that slithered into canyons and gorges to lead nobody knew where.

It was midafternoon when the *pastor* suddenly called a halt.

"They turned off somewhere," he announced. "There are no signs of passing here."

"There's some prints on that soft patch right ahead," the Sheriff demurred.

"They are old," said the shepherd. "Made many days before. No, we must turn back. That canyon on the right that we passed a short time before, doubtless they entered that."

They turned their horses and rode slowly back up the trail. The shepherd led the way, on foot, bending till his nose was close to the ground. They reached the dark canyon mouth and pulled up. The *pastor* nosed about like a hunting dog.

"Ha!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Behold, *senors!*"

He pointed to a round stone lying in the middle of the side track leading into the canyon. His companions saw that the upper surface of the boulder was slightly damp and encrusted with moist earth.

"Dadblame it, he's right!" swore the sheriff. "A hoof kicked that rock over not an hour back. They went in here, sure as blazes."

They rode into the canyon. A moment later the *pastor* indicated a broken twig dangling from an encroaching bush. The break was undoubtedly fresh. He mounted his horse again.

"They cannot turn off," he said. "*Senors,* we can ride with speed. They are less than an hour ahead of us and traveling slowly, for the pack mules grow weary."

"Pete," observed the sheriff as they touched up their horses, "for some time now I been thinkin' that we need another deputy to give you a hand with your chores. Fact is, I've had my eyes skun for a likely feller for quite a spell."

"And I've a notion you've spotted him," Miller instantly replied, with a nod toward the young *pastor.*

"Uh-huh, reckon I have," agreed the sheriff. "What's your name, son?"

"Manuel Flores," the tracker replied.

"And where were you born?"

"El Paso county."

"Fine," said the sheriff. "That makes you a Texas citizen. Okay, Manuel, we'll talk things over when we get back to town. I figger you're cut out for somethin' better than ridin' herd on woolies. Time you're gettin' started at it. Let's go, boys. We got to catch them sidewinders before it gets dark."

A mile farther on they splashed through a sizeable stream that diagonalled across the canyon floor and dived into a side gorge.

"There'd be no fordin' this crik right after a hard rain down here," the sheriff remarked. "It's belly deep on the horses as it is, and it runs like a mill race."

The canyon wound on and on, boring into the grim hills, silent, apparently void of life. Abruptly it straightened out. Its floor thinly dotted with scraggly brush and strewn with boulders, ran open for several miles to end in a blank, perpendicular wall of stone. The side walls were also sheer and a hundred feet in height.

The sheriff let out an exultant whoop.

"There they are!" he exclaimed. "Boys, we got 'em. This crack is a box. Look where the crik tumbles down the end wall. Sift sand, you work dodgers, and get your saddle guns ready."

The sheriff was right. Something over a mile ahead was a string of laden pack mules urged on by a group of horsemen.

With loose rein and busy spur, the posse surged ahead, eyes snapping with excitement. To all appearances the quarry was trapped.

But young Manuel Flores eyed the distant end wall of the canyon with a searching glance.

"*Senor* Sheriff," he suddenly exclaimed. "There is an opening in the rock ahead—narrow, but an opening. They make for it."

The sheriff peered with puckered lids.

"Blankety-blank it, you're right!" he swore. "Sift sand, or they'll give us the slip.

ON thundered the posse, their horses' irons ringing a wild tattoo on the stones. Soon it became apparent that the outlaws realized they were pursued. They could be seen turning in their saddles, and quirting the laboring mules to greater speed. Puffs of smoke mushroomed up from their ranks. Lead whined past the possemen or kicked up spurts of dust from the ground nearby.

"Pete," said the sheriff, "you're the best shot. See if you can't make 'em dodge a mite."

Miller drew his Winchester from the saddle boot and emptied the magazine at the fleeing owlhoots. One reeled in his saddle, but kept his seat, clutching the horn for support.

"Winged one of the sidewinders!" exulted the sheriff. "Try again."

Miller reloaded. But now lead was coming uncomfortably close. A posseman yelled a curse as a slug nicked his shoulder. Another put his hand to his face, down which blood was streaming from a gashed cheek. Miller clamped the butt of his rifle against his shoulder. His gray eyes glanced along the sights. He fired again and again. The others joined in. The canyon walls rocked to the boom of the shots.

"But the back of a speeding horse is not a good shooting stance. And the range was great. No more hits were scored. The owlhoots had ceased firing and were devoting all their energies to getting speed out of the mules.

"They're goin' to make it," growled the sheriff. "Blast it, there they go."

Into the narrow cleft in the cliff face streamed the quarry. The pursuers shouted to their horses and leaned low in their saddles.

From the fissure spurted smoke. A bullet fanned the sheriff's face. Another ripped Miller's sleeve.

"Unfork!" barked Ray. "Take cover and sneak up on them. They'll down us all if we stay in our hulls. Leave the horses. They won't stray."

Taking advantage of all possible cover, the posse crept forward. But something over two hundred yards from the cliff face they came to a halt behind a ridge. Ahead was bare ground commanded by the owlhoot's fire. The slightest exposure brought a hail of lead.

Sheriff Ray swore and glared at the dark opening. Pete Miller rolled a cigarette and examined the cliff top.

"Arch," he said, "I've a notion that crack either isn't very deep or opens into another box canyon. I figure we've got the devils corralled."

"Uh-huh, maybe," growled the sheriff. "For right now, anyhow. But it will be different when it gets dark. Then they can sneak out easy, and the advantage will all be on their side. They'll smoke us out in a hurry if we try to stay here. And if we ease back down the canyon, they'll have plenty of chances to get by us, what's left of us. We've got to do somethin' in a hurry."

Miller continued to eye the cliff top.

"I'd like to get up there and get a look into that crack," he said. "Maybe we could get the drop on them from up there."

"Chances are the cliff overhangs," said the sheriff, "but it's worth a try."

"We can climb the cliff beside where the stream comes down," observed Manuel Flores. "And we can reach the spot by working over to the right and hugging the side wall. Plenty of brush and rocks over there, and it's out of range from the mouth of the crevice."

"Let's go," said the sheriff. "Come on, Pete. You, too, Manuel. We'll get wet crossin' the crik, but that don't matter. The sun's hot and we'll soon dry out.

The rest of you fellers keep pluggin' away at the crack so they can't sneak out and take us from the rear."

The maneuver was executed without incident, the cliff face being sloping and broken. The crest was found to be thickly grown with tall sotol-yuccas heavy with big juice-filled pods. The retaining wall of the rushing stream, edging the crevice, was cracked and broken and but a few feet in width.

"Considerable water must drain into the crack when the crik is high," observed the sheriff. "Let's ease across again and see what we can see."

THEY sloshed through the water, reached the lip of the cliff and peered cautiously into the crevice. Here it widened into a bowl not more than twenty yards in diameter, with the floor sloping toward the outer canyon. They could just glimpse the split-pole roof of a cabin built near its head.

But as the sheriff anticipated, the cliff overhung and nothing could be seen of the outlaws. "Their hole-up, all right," growled Ray, "but there's no gettin' at the darn coyotes from up here."

At the word "coyote," Pete Miller suddenly lifted his head. His eyes blazed.

"Coyotes, that's it!" he exclaimed.

"What?" asked the mystified sheriff.

"Coyotes," Miller repeated. "Arch, rec'lect that coyote we watched drown out the prairie dog? What that little wolf did gives me a notion."

"What in blazes are you talkin' about?" demanded Ray irritably. "Them ain't prairie dogs down there."

"No," agreed Miller, "but they're holed up just like that prairie dog was, and I've a notion we can handle 'em just like the coyote handled him. Look at the rock edging the crik. It's all cracked and busted. If we could just set a charge of dynamite in those cracks we could blow out the wall and turn the crik into the crevice. We'd drown 'em out in a hurry, or at least block the mouth of the crevice till they couldn't get out. Then we'd soon starve 'em into surrenderin' and be able to haul 'em out with ropes."

"Might work," agreed the sheriff, "but we ain't got no dynamite and no time to go get some."

"Maybe we could get enough powder from our cartridges to do the trick," Miller observed hopefully.

"Not likely," differed the sheriff. "Would take a considerable charge to bust that rock."

Manuel Flores spoke for the first time. "*Senors*," he said excitely, "I believe I have it. Look at all the sotol heads hanging from those yuccas. They are dead ripe and swelled with sap. My people used to use them instead of powder. Even today prospectors in out-of-the-way regions use them."

"By gosh, you've got somethin' there, Manuel!" Ray exploded. "Stuff the pods into cracks, tamp 'em in tight and then light a fire over them. The juice in the head turns into steam and blows up like blazes. I've heard of that trick. Let's get busy. Be careful and keep down, though. If those jiggers down there happen to spot us at work we'll be dodgin' lead in no time."

With an eye on the westering sun they worked fast and furiously. They broke off the plump pods, stuffed them into cracks and tamped them tight. Then they heaped the rock with twigs and dry stalks. Farther back on the cliff they found dry branches and fallen trunks which provided more substantial fuel. Miller touched a match to the great heap. They recrossed the stream, squatted on the edge of the slope and waited. Below they could hear the intermittent banging of their companions' rifles as they held the attention of the outlaws in the crevice. Occasional answering shots sounded.

The tinder-dry brush and logs heaped on the creek bank burned fiercely, with a mighty crackling, sending up clouds of smoke and sheets of flame.

"Those hellions will wonder what in blazes is goin' on when they see all that smoke boilin' up," chuckled the sheriff.

"And they'll *know* when they see all that water boiling down," added Miller.

Fiercer and fiercer burned the fire. Although they were thirty yards distant, the three watchers could feel the heat. They tensed in anticipation.

SUDDENLY a muffled boom sounded. Burning embers flew in every direction. A second explosion followed almost instantly as the imprisoned steam let go. Another and another. Then a mighty blast hurled blazing logs into the air.

"A dozen of 'em cut loose all at once," exclaimed the sheriff.

"And there goes the water!" whooped Miller. "She's busted through, Arch, she's busted through! Look, the crik's already slacking off down here. Listen to her run!"

Through the roar of the falling water, yells knifed up faintly from the crevice's depths.

"Come on," yelped Miller, diving for the slope. "They'll be coming out of there or I'm a heap mistook."

Madly they scrambled down the rocks. Before they were half way to the canyon floor, a thunder of gunfire sounded. They redoubled their speed, slipping and sliding, leaping from boulder to boulder at imminent risk to life and limb. The canyon below was a pandemonium of yells, curses and shots. Smoke was fogging up from the ledge behind which the three possemen were crouched. They saw the outlaws bulging out of the flooded crevice like pips from a squeezed orange, guns flaming. After them surged snorting mules and horses.

Down the three rushed. They covered the last twenty yards in a cloud of dust and an avalanche of dislodged stones. Miller was the first to reach the canyon floor. He bounded out of the dust cloud and squarely into the arms of a squat, powerfully built man with bristling whiskers and blazing black eyes. A gun flamed in his face. The bullet nicked his ear. He lunged forward, caught a corded wrist and jerked the gun muzzle up even as it exploded again. He had no time to draw his own six. His left fist lashed out and connected with a force that jarred his arm to the shoulder.

Down went the owlhoot, Miller on top of him still clinging to his wrist. Over and over they rolled, hitting, kicking, gouging. Around them sounded yells and shots and curses. The outlaw twisted his hand about and pulled trigger. Miller saw a blaze of stars and reddish flame as the slug grazed his temple. He twisted, writhed, struck out madly, blood pouring down his face and blinding him.

He gripped the flailing gun barrel with his free hand and jerked the weapon down. There was a muffled report, a choking yell. Blood gushed over Miller's hand. He felt his antagonist shiver, writhe convulsively and stiffen. Abruptly he realized that his struggles had ceased. Also that the shooting had stopped. As he turned his head, Sheriff Ray and Manuel Flores came charging up, guns ready.

But they did not need to use them. The owlhoot lay limp and motionless, blood staining his shirt front.

"Turned his gun just in time and he got himself dead center," panted Miller, staggering to his feet and wiping his streaming face. "No, I ain't hurt—just a couple of scratches. All over?"

"All over," growled Sheriff Ray. "Three of 'em dead and one more goin' fast. We got two prisoners. By gosh, feller, that one you did for is Wolf Larsen hisself. A fine chore, an almighty fine chore."

Miller glanced at the torrent boiling from the crevice.

"Reckon we'll have to come back with ropes and snake the silver bricks out over the cliff top," he observed. "There's no going into that hole any more."

"Uh-huh, we'll do that," agreed the sheriff. "Well, reckon this is the finish of Wolf Larsen's hell raisin'."

"Thanks to *Senor* Coyote," chuckled Miller. "Takes a wolf to catch a wolf, Arch."

"I'd like to kill you, but I don't hanker to hang!"

Bullets in the Night

By HAL HAMMOND

AS TOM KILBURN stepped out of his small log house he flicked a glance toward the scarlet tracery that tinted the gray clouds loafing lazily in the sky. His calm, blue eyes roved downward to study the darkly-carpeted mountains that encircled the valley, searching for the enemy he felt was there. In a setting such as this Brad Jessup could pick him off easily enough. There was only one thing might stop the ex-convict from trying. That was something on which Tom Kilburn was counting heavily.

As the clop-clop of hoof beats on the trail broke the late afternoon stillness, Kilburn pushed a gnarled hand nervously through his thinning gray hair. "Long John" Brandon, sheriff of Lone Tree came around a bend, riding easily, his slouch

Brad Jessup Finally Showed His Hand—a Hand that Held a Rifle!

hat pulled low to ward off the glare of the setting sun. He pulled his black gelding to a quiet stop in front of Tom Kilburn. Although he was nearing forty his gray eyes were alert and he sat his saddle lightly. He said with a mild attempt at humor that had an empty sound:

"Been a long time since you've been in town, Tom. Kind of miss our checker games." He paused, but as the oldster made no comment he went on. "Thought maybe you'd like to ride in and spend the night with Martha and little Tommy. They're both anxious to see you."

Martha was Kilburn's only child. Tommy was her small son. She had been badly hurt in an accident that had killed her husband the year before. As a result Tom Kilburn was her sole means of support. Kilburn's smile grew stiff. Slowly he shook his head.

"In a couple days, John."

The sheriff gestured impatiently. Through the shadows the gray eyes in his long face had a worried look. He cast aside all pretense.

"Jessup's been out a week now," the sheriff said. "He ain't one to forget old scores. You was sheriff when he pulled that job at Lone Tree. He won't be forgettin' you was the one who tracked him down and put him in the pen."

"No," Tom Kilburn said. "I reckon he won't."

LONG JOHN BRANDON expelled his breath in a sigh of regret. "Well, the boys in town won't like it when I come in without you. Neither will Martha and Tommy."

"There's some things a man can't run away from, John. You know that."

"Yeah. I reckon I do. Bein' sheriff I know what you mean. I've been tempted. Be careful, Tom."

"I was sheriff for ten years, Kilburn remarked dryly. "I'm still alive."

Thoughtfully he watched Long John Brandon ride off. His thoughts returned to the problem at hand. He had a feeling that the outlaw was not far away—that Jessup had been following his movements —that Jessup would be wondering where he cached the gold he was slowly extracting from this creek. Because of this feeling he was sure that he needn't expect an ambusher's bullet from Brad Jessup. The ex-convict might want his life, but he would want the gold first.

Evening shadows erased the crimson crown from the craggy peaks to the West as Tom Kilburn walked stiffly toward a small, windowless log cabin on the edge of the creek, opened the heavy door and went inside.

Against the rear wall was a large fireplace with a heavy iron grate piled high with rocks. Embers glowed redly in the dying fire. Heat from the rocks reached out at Kilburn as he put more wood on the glowing coals. This was his bath house, copied after the Finns with whom he had worked in Montana Territory some years before. It was his means of relaxing after a hard day's work. The hot steam soaked the tiredness out of his old bones.

Satisfied that the rocks would soon be hot enough he went out, closed the door, and retraced his steps toward his little log house, still thinking of Jessup. He was wondering when the outlaw would show his hand.

It was sooner than he expected. It was waiting for him when he opened the cabin door. Waiting for him in the form of a rifle barrel that prodded him stiffly in the stomach.

A voice, gently mocking, reached out to him from behind the rifle barrel.

"Been a long time, Kilburn. An awfully long time."

Tom Kilburn nodded. Jessup had certainly caught him flat-footed. That's what happened to a man when he got old. A little stab of fear punched at his backbone as he turned his back on his enemy, walked quietly over to the table and lighted the kerosene lamp. It sputtered smokily. Carefully he adjusted it until the flame burned evenly. Not until then did he turn around to look at the man behind him.

Ten years had changed Brad Jessup.

His narrow face was still pale with prison pallor. His dark eyes shifted constantly —were never still. Their restless movements made Kilburn nervous.

"You're gettin' old, Kilburn," Jessup said softly. "Not like you to be caught so easy." His dark eyes gleamed warily.

"Reckon I couldn't stay out of your way forever."

"Reckon not." Jessup shrugged his bony shoulders. "You got a little chore to do for me."

"Yeah."

"Yeah." Jessup watched Kilburn closely, the light of avarice in his stare. "I was watching you pannin' gold this afternoon. Took a look at the bottom of your sluice box after you left. Found plenty of color in it. Also in that batch a silt you got dryin'. I know you got some dust hid around here some place."

"What does it get me—if I tell you?" Kilburn felt the continuing impact of the outlaw's hard stare as he asked the question.

Again Jessup shrugged his bony shoulders. Kilburn had the feeling that this wait, after ten years, was almost more than Jessup could stand.

"Nothin' much," Jessup answered stonily. "I'd like to kill you. That you can guess. But I don't hanker to hang. It's just possible I might get caught."

"And if I don't tell you."

"I spent ten years in a lousy, stinkin' pen! You put me there. Ten years!" Jessup's thin lips drew back. "If you don't tell me, I'll make you suffer plenty. And then you'll die. That you can bank on. Whether I get caught and hang or not!"

AGAIN Kilburn felt the chill stab of fear. This time it lay along his hard belly muscles, pulling them into knots. He had tried to prepare himself for this meeting. Ever since a prospector had told him two days before that Jessup was out, he had thought of what would happen when he and Jessup met. Now, for the first time, he realized that he was really getting old. Ten years ago he had known how to handle Jessup. Now he caught himself wishing he had taken the sheriff's advice. Abruptly he dismissed the thought from his mind. The knowledge that he had even thought such a thing lay bitter in his mouth.

"Make up your mind." Jessup's words were like flint. "I saw the sheriff ride in here. Got a hunch he was lookin' for me. You make up your mind—and fast."

He should have taken the gold into town, Kilburn thought. Then there would be nothing to tempt him. That gold dust would keep Martha and his grandson for a long time.

But now. . . . He had only to look at Jessup to realize how cruel the man could be. There was just the barest chance that he could outwit Jessup. If that chance failed, what Jessup would do to him bunched his muscles into knots. But whatever Jessup did, he told himself grimly, he wouldn't reveal where the gold dust was hidden. Only Martha, besides himself, knew of its whereabouts. No one else would ever know. Especially Jessup.

Kilburn sighed. He nodded his head, ready to take the chance before his courage failed him. Stiffly he walked toward the door, Jessup's rifle was prodding against his backbone. Painfully it sawed against his vertebrae as he stopped before the door of his small bath house and opened it.

As they entered the hot stones gave off an eerie glow that pushed its flickering way through the darkness. Softly the door swung shut.

"So this is where you hid your dust."

Kilburn nodded. Slowly he walked over to a water barrel close to the glowing rocks. He took his time. Everything depended on what happened in the next few minutes. Either he stood a slim chance of getting the best of Jessup, or Kilburn's death would follow! With a slow deliberation Kilburn stooped over. He picked up a pail. He dipped it deep into the barrel of water and lifted it out.

"The gold's in the bottom of the barrel," he said.

"Huh?" Jessup grunted. The simple

statement threw him momentarily off guard, a possibility on which the old man had been counting heavily. It gave him the chance he had been waiting for. With a full-armed swing he threw the full pail of water on the red-hot stones, plunging the room into instant darkness.

At the impact of the water the stones seemed to explode. Mingled with their crash and crackle the shattering roar of Jessup's rifle burst across Kilburn's eardrums with violent force. And then the steam blasted the convict in the face. Through the waves of heat he heard Jessup gasp and choke.

Kilburn groped his way back to the barrel, flung three more pails of water on the rocks in swift succession, then jumped quickly away as Jessup commenced shooting again.

Away from the stones rolled fresh waves of steam that turned the heat into a monstrous thing. It sent the salty sweat running down Kilburn's leathery face in streams. Each gasping breath he drew seared his lungs. But he had another job that he had to do. A job that couldn't wait. Through the moist scalding darkness he ran as though it were daylight. He had practised this many times in the last few days with a blindfold across his eyes. Now that practise paid off. Swiftly he found the door, slid his hands down to the lock, pulled the key out of his pocket, slipped the key into the hole and turned it. Maybe he could have slid out without Jessup plugging him, but he felt it was his job to get Jessup. Jerking out the key he moved quickly away from the door, the slight noise of his movements overcome by Jessup's coughing and clawing along the cabin wall. Jessup's frenzied voice floated through the smothering blanket of steam.

"I'm gettin' out of this sweat box! I'll get you when you stick your face through the door! I'll make you pay for this!"

GRIMLY Kilburn listened as Jessup jerked frantically on the door knob. Listened to his violent, hysterical outburst as the door resisted his efforts.

At the knowledge that his escape was cut off Jessup let loose one hate-filled outburst.

"I can stand it as long as you can, old man. I'll be sittin' here listenin' to any sound. Any time I hear one I'm goin' to put a slug smack in the middle of it."

Silence moved in, thick, cloying and sticky. Kilburn hugged the floor, estimating his chances against this unforeseen circumstance. He had been gambling on Jessup's breaking. On his not being able to stand the heat. But Jessup was taking it, the hate in his body stronger than anything else. According to Kilburn's count there were two bullets left in Jessup's gun. They could easily smash the life out of him.

The silence was hard to bear. It was too quick a change. It rubbed against Kilburn's body with a solid, pushing force. Silence and heat. Heat that sucked the strength out of him even though he had taken such steam baths for years. But if it was hard on him, Kilburn thought grimly, it would be a lot harder on Jessup. Only Jessup was younger. He had that one advantage—plus a gun.

And still the silence pressed against him. How long, Kilburn wondered dazedly, could a man stand such punishment. How long?

There was only one answer to that. Kilburn had to get those two bullets out of Jessup's gun. He had to take that chance of being shot. Awkwardly he lunged to his feet, but the searing stab of a bullet knocked one leg out from under him. He fell heavily.

Again Jessup fired. He clicked the hammer against empty chambers. Clumsily he moved around the room, the heavy barrel swishing through the air as Jessup sought a target for his silent anger.

The barrel's sibilant hiss as it cut through the fetid air had a sound that to Kilburn was more deadly than the dry rattle of a sidewinder. Kilburn flattened to the floor as the flailing rifle all but lifted the hair from his head. If Jessup struck again—and a little lower—Kilburn would die.

For ages it seemed to Kilburn as if Jessup just stood there, as though he knew Kilburn was lying at his feet. He seemed to be toying with Kilburn as a cat would play with a mouse. But finally Jessup moved on.

KILBURN rolled over to the fireplace. His clawing hands tightened desperately around a rock the size of his fist. At the sounds Kilburn made Jessup stopped again. He started moving back toward the oldster. With a full-armed swing Kilburn swung the stone. Suddenly it landed against flesh. Jessup grunted. There was pain in the sound. The descending swish of his rifle barrel abruptly stopped.

Tom Kilburn seized this slight advantage. It might be a trick the outlaw was setting for him but he would have to risk it. He grabbed another rock, the heat of which seared his fist. He crawled toward Jessup, bumped into his legs, felt them stiffen momentarily. With cat-like quickness Jessup's weight dropped on the old man.

"Now I've got you!" Hate and anger gave a vice-like power to the clutching fingers that searched for Kilburn's windpipe. They closed on it with a tenacious grip.

In those grasping fingers there was power—such power as only consuming hate could give them. The pain that bit into Kilburn's throat as he felt his adam's apple being pushed against the bones of his neck was a terrible thing. With his senses swimming dizzily, he reached his fumbling fingers upward in an effort to locate Jessup's head. His arms began to flail in this desperate attempt.

Nothing stood out with any clarity in this horrible pressure of pain—nothing but the intolerable nauseating agony in his throat, the harsh, rasping breath so close to his own that it sprayed his face with oven-like heat.

But finally into the conflicting welter of emotions that swirled chaotically in Kilburn's numbing mind one thought crystalized. It stiffened his resistance His will to live. He still had a chance. His desperately searching fingers had reached up into Jessup's matted, sweat-soaked hair, and his fingers still clung tenaciously to the rock.

With a convulsive effort he brought the stone down on that matted head. Again and again he did it until the clutching fingers on his throat loosened their obstinate grip. Jessup's body went limp. It slipped to the floor.

Wearily Kilburn groped his way to the door and unlocked it. Over him rolled a blast of air that felt frigid against his steamy, sweat-soaked body. With hurrying steps he went back to the wall, jerked down some ropes he had placed there for just this purpose, and securely tied the still unconscious Jessup. Then he went outside, breathing deeply of the cold mountain air.

Slowly he walked toward his log house, feeling the warm blood running down his leg. He had been lucky it was only a flesh wound. He cleaned and bandaged the bullet slash. He dressed himself in dry clothes. Just as he finished Long John Brandon came striding into the log cabin.

"Been worried," the sheriff said. "No need of your taking chances against Jessup alone."

Kilburn smiled. It was a weary smile. He took Long John Brandon to the bath house. "No need to worry," he said, and pointed to the trussed up Jessup on the floor.

Long John scratched his head. "How did it happen he didn't shoot you on sight?"

"Mite greedy is all. Wanted my gold dust." Tom Kilburn stared at the water barrel. The gold was all there in the bottom, covered with a layer of gravel and sand. Gold that would mean comfort for Martha and Tommy. But it had been close.

"Might as well help you pack Jessup to town," Kilburn murmured. "Reckon I'll need a little doctorin'. Besides, it's early yet. There's plenty of time for a game of checkers." ● ● ●

From the window, Johnny called out: "Drop that gun!"

For twelve years Johnny Kennedy carried hate in his heart, hate for the man who hanged his father— and now he came to exact vengeance, rope in hand!

KEYED to KILL

CHAPTER I

Hang-Noose

THERE was that hangman's rope. It lay on the bottom of the glass case. The whiskey drummer looked at it with fixed curiosity. The rope had been cut off a foot or so beyond the half dozen tight turns leading to the noose. It looked like a gray snake curled in its cage. It wasn't. That noosé had strangled a man as he jerked and kicked, hastening his own end.

The drummer knew that much, and he wished he knew more. Not for morbid reasons, but because the rope was the key to an incident belonging to an era already dying, an era of brave men and daring women, of cheats and cowards, cattle and kings. The drummer was not of the West and never would be, though he stayed there the rest of his days. He knew that. But in the West he had found this thing that gave meaning to his life. For he was one of those who finds fulfillment in picturing the exploits of others. His mind probed beneath what he heard and saw, and he was never satisfied until he knew the thing in its entirety. So the drummer was curious. He needed to know the story behind the rope. A man he met in Tucson had mentioned it. "If you ever get down in that country, stop in at Pat Dord's saloon," the man had said. "Don't know as he'll give you an order, but you might get him to tell you about the hangman's rope he keeps in his office."

So there he was in Pat Dord's office, and there was the rope. The drummer straightened, sighing, a gaunt man in a tight suit and a derby hat. He hoped the saloon keeper was in a talkative mood.

A Novelet by
JOHANAS L. BOUMA

What was the rope doing in a glass case in his office? The drummer faced the door as it opened.

"I can use a half dozen cases of your best," Pat Dord said. "Hardly worth your trip down here, but I guess you fellows break even."

"A little here, a little there," the drummer said, filling an order blank. He closed the pad and looked up. Pat Dord was sixty, he judged—a thick man with a blunt face and curly gray hair. He looked as though he belonged in a saddle, not behind a bar wearing an apron.

SPECULATIVELY the drummer glanced at the glass case. He wasn't quite sure how to broach the subject. "Someone mentioned that rope to me," he said, smiling. "I guess men were pretty free with a rope in the old days."

"Had to be." Pat lowered himself into his swivel chair, and his answering smile was thin. "In those days a man made his own laws in order to protect what was his. And he used a gun or a rope to back his play."

"Did he always have to? Take the man who died on the end of that rope. Was his death justified?"

"Those who hanged him thought so, yes." Pete Dord looked for a silent moment at the rope in the glass case. "His name was Tom Kennedy. He was much like the rest of us, neither good nor bad. But he butchered another man's beef, so he hanged for his crime."

"And who passed judgment?"

"The owner, of course!" Pat Dord said, astonished. "Fred Corley wasn't a man to sit still while another robbed him."

"Hanging seems a hard sentence," the drummer murmured.

"It is. But Fred was of the old school. He never compromised. Oh, don't think he took what he wanted at any cost. He didn't. He was a just man. But when he made a decision he never backed down. And if he was in doubt no one ever knew it. He was true to what he believed."

The drummer nodded slowly and without reason. True to what he believed! Even if it meant a man's life. Was this to be another legendary tale to stand beside those of Wild Bill Hickok, Billy the Kid and countless others? The drummer knew about them. He had opened the books and had read of the Santa Fe trail and Abilene, Tombstone and Dodge City, when the streets echoed with the roar of six-guns. And he had felt within himself the raw edge of the land and its people. He suppressed a sigh. "Fred Corley," he said. "I don't recall ever hearing the name."

"Fred's been dead these past ten years. Died in bed, the way he aimed to. But it was three times there that I know of when he just missed meeting his Maker with his boots on. First time was right out of this office door, in the saloon. That was long before I bought the place. But I was here when Johnny Kennedy came in to kill old Fred."

"Johnny Kennedy? But you just mentioned a Tom Kennedy."

"Johnny was Tom's son. He was ten when his father was hanged. He saw it happen. Twelve years later he came back to even the score. He almost did."

"Twelve years," the drummer said softly. "A long time for a man to carry hate in his heart. And Johnny was only a boy. You say it happened in this saloon?"

"Yes. Fred had a habit he never broke. Every morning he left his house and rode over his land. And he measured his property by the mile. There's an abandoned mining town up in Brush Canyon, and that too was on his property. He used to cut through there and cross the bench to the South Pass before turning back to town here. He never missed taking the ride, summer or winter, even after Doc Brady advised him not to. And when he reached town he always came in for his drink. I know. I ran a few head of my own then, and rode with him once in a while."

They were silent. The drummer's mind leaped with anticipation. A ghost town! To have an abandoned mining town on your own land! He could imagine a town like that during its boom days. He could

see it on a Saturday night when a drunken, howling man-swarm crowded its board walks. He could hear boisterous laughter and the tinkle of piano music.

BY AN effort, the drummer tried to force impatience out of his voice. "What happened?" he asked. "What stopped Johnny from doing what he came to do?"

"Ben Gancher, Fred's ramrod. He was in the saloon. Ben was a real cowman, a big, good-looking devil. He'd been with Fred since he was little more than a boy, back when Fred branded his first hide. That's a long time ago now, but he was about thirty when Johnny Kennedy came back.

"Ben was all right in his way, I suppose. He had his good points and his bad. It wouldn't have surprised anybody if he'd ended up as Fred's son-in-law. I reckon the ranch meant as much to him as it did to Fred, maybe more. He and Fred started it from scratch, and sometimes they seemed more like partners than boss and hired man. Hell, Ben even helped plan the big house. It's a 'dobe place of two stories, with a courtyard. They had a bunch of Mexicans in to build it, and Ben supervised them. You might have thought he owned the place the way he talked, but folks took that for granted. Had his room in the house and put his feet on the sofa. That's how Ben fitted in."

"And the daughter? What was she like?"

"Had a mind of her own." Pat Dord grinned. "Still does, for that matter. I hardly remember her growing up because she was always back East, going to school. She must've been about nineteen when she came back for good. She was mistress of that big 'dobe house, and half the young bucks around spent time in the courtyard trying to put their brand on her. Not that they had much chance with Ben around. I guess Gwen thought a lot of him. She was a handsome girl with freckles on her nose and hair the color of wheat. Many's the time I've seen her and Ben riding together."

"And did Johnny coming here change all that?" the drummer asked.

"It did that."

"But there must have been others in on the hanging. Didn't Johnny look for them too?"

Pat Dord shook his head slowly. "He was after Fred, no one else. Maybe he wasn't sure of the other two, or maybe he didn't give them any importance. Ben was one of them. He helped hang Tom Kennedy. But Johnny put the blame on old Fred. I remember when he came in, a lean, hungry youngster in faded Levis and scuffed boots. Hair black as midnight. He looked like a down-and-out rider without a tin dime to his name. Ben and I were swapping lies with the apron, and old Fred stood a little to one side. He always did. He was a stern man, and humor didn't touch him. Johnny must have recognized him right away. That rope you see there dangled from his left hand. None of us paid any attention to him. I just glanced at him, that's all. We didn't know what was going to happen."

Pat Dord fell silent. He sat as though hunched inside himself, chin on chest, eyes brooding with memories, thick hands clasped on his stomach. And the drummer was hearing the muffled sound of hoofs in the street's dust. A lean young rider was standing in the saloon, and a noose dangled from his left hand. Sunlight slanted through the dusty windows and spilled yellow on the boards, and there were the smells of whisky, beer, and tobacco smoke. The drummer pictured the scene in his mind. Johnny Kennedy looking at the backs of the three men lined up at the bar. And as Pat Dord continued speaking, these figures moved and became alive.

THE noose swung only a little in Johnny Kennedy's hand. His narrow sun-darkened face was without expression, and his eyes never wavered from Fred Corley's straight back. Then his gaze lifted to the bar mirror and he saw the craggy face of the man he had come to

kill. For a fleeting moment their eyes touched.

"You!" Johnny said then, and flicked his wrist. The noose landed with a thud at Fred Corley's elbow. "Take a good look," said Johnny. "The rope belongs to you. You used it to hang my father. I've kept it all these years. Now I'm giving it back."

Old Fred glanced at the rope, then turned his head to look at Johnny. There was gray stubble on his lean cheeks and skin folds in his neck, and his hooded eyes were hard, flinty, impersonal. "You're Tom Kennedy's boy," he said.

"I cut him down and buried him," Johnny said. "His grave is still there, if you know where to look for it."

"I know where it is," old Fred said quietly. "Permit me to say, young man, that you're a fool. Your father was a fool. He knew the penalty for butchering another man's beef."

"We needed the food," Johnny said harshly.

"It makes no difference why he did it."

Johnny shifted his legs. "Draw, damn you," he said through tight lips. "I've waited twelve years to kill you. I've counted the days, and not one passed but what I didn't plan for this to happen. You—"

"Young man, you're beginning to irritate me! The hanging was justified and I feel no remorse. The thing ended a long time ago."

And old Fred looked at the young face with the tight mouth and the blazing eyes, and he remembered the father. He had told Tom Kennedy not once, but twice, to leave his cows alone. For he had found the hoofs and hides where Tom had buried them after previous kills. Twice was enough to tell any man. Fred Corley had a going spread, other nesters were moving in, and he meant to set an example. Harsh measures? Fred Corley didn't think so. He was protecting his own. Tom Kennedy had stolen and had been warned not to steal again. But he had, and no compromise was possible. So now old Fred faced the son, and he knew he didn't have a chance against him. But the thought was as impersonal as his eyes—it touched no responsive cord inside him.

"Draw, damn you!" Johnny said again. "I'm giving you the chance you didn't give my father."

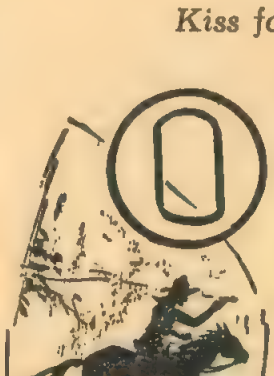
"For your own sake—" Fred began.

"Shut up!" Johnny's face was pale with the fury of his anger. His body arched forward like a drawn bow. "I came to kill you. Nothing can change that. And I'll do it if I have to shoot you in cold blood."

"That won't be necessary—" And in that moment old Fred's bony hand snaked down to slap the butt of his gun.

CHAPTER II

Kiss for the Nurse



OLD Fred was too slow. Age was against him. He knew that as he moved. Johnny was itching to kill. He'd had this moment in mind for twelve long years. He gave old Fred first move, but even so he cleared leather first.

That's what happened one mid-morning in the saloon. That's what Pat Dord and Ben Gancher saw happen. And Ben's eyes were thoughtful with remembering, and with the knowledge of how this would end. So when old Fred went for his gun, Ben acted with the faint reluctance of a man who draws to a poor hand. He drew and fired in one smooth motion, and the bullet caught Johnny high in the chest and dropped him where he stood. And old Fred turned on his foreman with blazing eyes.

"I didn't appreciate that one damn bit!" he said. "Next time I'll settle my own quarrels, understand?"

There was intense resentment on the older man's face, and something he didn't quite understand.

"Get Doc Brady!" old Fred snapped at the crowd that had suddenly streamed in from the street. "And keep back, damn you! Give him air!"

He looked down at the young man and acknowledged a grudging admiration. The fellow was a fool, but he'd come as a man to settle what he considered a wrong, and that was something old Fred couldn't ignore. And when Doc Brady came and said Johnny would live but would need a lot of care, Fred thought a moment, then said, "Ben, run down to the livery and get a wagon. Somebody get a mattress and blankets from the hotel, and you, Brady, see that he's comfortable. I'm taking him to the house, and I'll drive the wagon myself."

That's how Johnny arrived at the house of the man he had come to kill. Old Fred drove the wagon and told Ben to ride ahead and notify Gwen. Maybe he wondered then if he was making a mistake in bringing Johnny home. How would Gwen feel about it?

Fred's daughter was waiting on the porch when the wagon rolled up. She came down the steps, slim and lithe, skirts swirling, and that's when Johnny first saw her. He didn't know where he was. Not right away. He saw her snub nose, reddish blonde hair, and a run of freckles below anxious blue eyes. A straight full mouth and a wide brow made her handsome, rather than pretty.

Johnny looked up at her and smiled slowly, and his voice was a weak whisper. "Man, this must be heaven, and you're an angel," is what he said.

She straightened, blushing faintly, and gave crisp orders to have him carried to an upstairs bedroom. Ben helped. Old Fred started to. But when Johnny saw him, he began to rave. He told Fred to keep his damn hands off him and, still raving, he lapsed into unconsciousness.

He didn't know that a few minutes later Gwen faced her father. They were downstairs in the dining room, with the venerable beamed ceiling. The floor was red tile, and hide rugs were scattered around. Mounted deer heads lined the wall, and heavy red drapes covered the windows.

"Well, what happened?" Gwen demanded. "Who is that man?"

Fred Corley frowned. He knew then he shouldn't have brought young Kennedy here. "It's nothing," he said shortly. "There was a little trouble, is all. He'll stay here till he's well; no longer."

"You didn't answer my question," she said.

"The boy is the son of a man I once had trouble with," he said grudgingly.

She was impatient. "Ben told me that much."

Old Fred looked at her quickly. "What else did he tell you?"

"That the fellow tried to kill you. Why? What was the trouble between you and his father?"

There it was. This was what old Fred dreaded facing. For Gwen didn't know about the hanging. He was sure of that, for he had sent her back east to school right after it happened. So there it was, and now he didn't like to explain this to his daughter, but he had to. His bushy brows lowered over his hard eyes.

"His father butchered my beef and I hung him for it," he said abruptly.

"So that's it!" Her eyes were hard as his own. "You talk about how you carved an empire out of rock and sand, but you never mention those who got hurt in the process. Now it's catching up with you."

THE incident was beginning to anger old Fred. She was of a new generation, he of the old, and she didn't understand. She didn't try to understand. She thought the violence of his generation had been unwarranted. It was the only thing they had ever argued about. His voice was harsh: "I built this ranch the way I saw fit and I'm running it the same way. And I'll tell you what I told this fellow—I have no remorse. The thing ended long ago. I won't consider what happened today a part of it—"

"You can't deny it!"

"Damn it, I will deny it! And if you had any sense you'd know what I mean. The boy did wrong. He has no right to take up

his father's quarrel. And if Tom Kennedy was here he'd say the same thing. That's why I deny his right to do what he did. If everyone felt as he does, there would be no end to killing. He was wrong and one day he'll know it. And so will you."

He walked out then, leaving her standing there, her hands gripping the back of a heavy ornate chair. But he came back at once, and he said, "I'll get a woman in from town to take care of him. I don't want you doing it."

"If you do, I'll send her packing," Gwen said sharply. "The least I can do is nurse him."

They stared at each other with open hostility. "All right," Fred said finally. "Maybe you'll learn something from it—something they didn't teach you in school."

She was still standing there when Ben came down from upstairs. He gave her a friendly hug and grinned at her. "What's eating you, sugar? Get your riding duds on and we'll take a run up to the South Pass."

She made an impatient gesture. "Not this afternoon, Ben," she said, and went past him to the door.

"Hey, wait up," he said. "You told me yesterday—"

"Yes, I know, but I'm busy now. Some other time, Ben." And she was gone.

For a moment he stared at the empty doorway, the grin frozen on his face. Then his brow darkened, and he said softly, "Well, I'll be damned."

Not a word about him saving the old man's life. Not a damn word. He gave a short curse and stalked out of the room, not sure if he was cursing himself, the girl, or the wounded man upstairs.

That's what happened in Fred Corley's house after Johnny get there. That's how the trouble started. Old Fred refused to let it bother him. He had a ranch to run. That came first. Young Kennedy would have time to think over his folly while he lay abed. In time he would realize that he had acted like a damn fool. And Gwen would change her mind, too. She'd get her fill of nursing a sick man soon enough. But old Fred was wrong about Gwen. She'd never been needed, not really. Now she was. And she was curious about Johnny Kennedy.

Johnny lay in the big soft bed and watched the days pass: sunlight on the window, bright noon, twilight and darkness. He mended slowly. The house lived around him. Ben's heavy boots on the stairs, his door opening and closing across the hall. The Mexican housekeeper singing in a soft, heavy voice, or arguing with the Mexican cook. Doc Brady's cheerful voice in the hall, his cheerful grin as he entered. The sound of hoofs and the occasional shout of a rider through the open window; the sight of desert dissolving to hazy mountains.

And Gwen. She was in and out constantly. They seldom spoke. But his eyes would follow her around the room, and sometimes they would smile at each other in an embarrassed and puzzled way, as though both were uncertain of this thing that stood between them.

His color was back now, and he was restless in the big bed. Doc Brady had come and gone, and in a moment Gwen came in, and she was smiling.

"The doctor says you can sit up now. Do you feel you can make it?"

"Sure," Johnny said promptly. He grinned, rubbing his cheek. "It's about time I shaved, too."

She looked dubious. "Do you think—"

"Just get me some hot water and a razor," Johnny said.

HE SAT up while she was gone, pillows behind his back. There she came. "You want me to—"

But he lathered his own face, and he used the straight-edged razor. His skin was pale, but it glowed, and his eyes were clear. She had been holding the bowl and mirror for him, and now she put them on the table. He said, "Wow," on a long breath and slid down. "That tired me."

"The cook is fixing you a steak," she said, "and you can't eat it lying down."

"I'm fixing to sit up," Johnny said.

"I'll help you."

She was a sturdy girl and she slipped an arm gently under his waist. A pale lock of her golder hair brushed his cheek. Their eyes met and they were smiling, seeking an answer to all their tomorrows. Something old as time and exciting as the unknown leaped between them, and what happened was as natural as the sunlight that shone through the window. Their lips touched. Then they were apart, and Gwen shook her head and looked down at her hands.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "I didn't mean to do that."

"You didn't."

He reached up and she shut her eyes, feeling his palms against her cheeks. She murmured "Don't" with a faint sigh, and then he drew her down and kissed her hard and she bent, their mouths together, until his head rested on the pillow.

That's when the door opened. It was the housekeeper, a jolly woman carrying a tray with the steak still sizzling on the plate. She stifled a giggle as Gwen straightened, her face flushed. And so the story started about Gwen and Johnny. A laughing remark made in the kitchen that spread like a brush fire. Ben Gancher heard it. He was in the bunkhouse when a puncher passed the remark about old Fred's daughter and Johnny Kennedy. It was meant as a joke, but Ben didn't take it as one. He beat hell out of the man and threw him off the place. That evening he talked to Gwen. She was in the parlor, knitting, and her hair shone in the lamplight. She saw right away that he'd been fighting, and she told him so. But he ignored her.

"There's talk about you and Kennedy," he said. "Is it true?"

She looked at him. She had known him since she was a child, had always liked him. But now she didn't like his manners, and was about to tell him so when his question got in the way. Was it true about her and Johnny? I want it to be, she thought, and took a deep breath and said, "I guess it is, Ben."

"Gwen, for God's sake, the fellow tried to kill Fred—"

"I know that."

"Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"I can't help how I feel," she said.

"Listen, honey—" he took her hands "—it's always been you and me, hasn't it? Why, I had it all planned!"

"I didn't, Ben," she said, drawing her hands from his. "You're like one of the family, but I never loved you, not that way. You must have known that."

Her withdrawal angered him. He had been so sure. "Maybe Fred will have something to say about this."

"He probably will," Gwen said. And then, "Please let's not quarrel, Ben." She smiled and touched his arm. "Remember when you taught me to ride? How we laughed when I fell from the saddle?"

"I remember."

"That's how I always want it to be with us, Ben."

THERE were depths in Ben that not even he was aware of. Maybe he had carried these traits within himself always. Now that the certainty of his future was stripped away, a strange and terrible thought occurred to him, and it was that had he been a little slower on the draw, none of this would have happened.

For there was this in Ben Gancher, and he knew it now—deep down inside him he thought of the ranch as his. Maybe the feeling had always been there, for his sweat and efforts had gone into building the place. But it was not his, not really. And the thought dogged him during the days that followed. He slept under the same roof with Fred, ate the same food, never wanted for anything. But it wasn't ownership. He could lay in his bed in the big house and think of it as his, but it wasn't true. He could accompany Fred on his daily ride across the land and realize that a deed was only a piece of paper, but that didn't help either. So he brooded, a big man, sullenly silent, nursing a wound that only he knew existed.

The days passed and Johnny was walking around the room. Then it was time to leave, and there was a debt he meant to pay. He found old Fred Corley in his

study. It was the first time they had seen each other since the day of the shooting, for old Fred never came upstairs. Johnny walked in there with the spring of new strength in his legs and stopped in front of the desk.

"I owe you board and room and a doctor bill," he said, and he might have been speaking to a desk clerk. "I'm broke but I mean to pay, so I'll work it out if you can use a top hand."

Fred Corley looked at him with his stern old eyes. He'd almost forgotten the youngster was on the place. But he could not disregard the young fool's offer, for he had the right to settle a fair debt.

"See Ben Gancher," he said. "He'll put you to work and tell you when your debt is paid. And if you're the top hand you claim to be, maybe he'll put you on steady."

"I'll never work steady for you or take anything from you."

"Suit yourself," Fred Corley said. He wore brass-rimmed spectacles on the end of his nose, and he shoved them up a little before continuing his desk work. His voice was flat. "Close the door as you go out."

CHAPTER III

Ambushed

BEN put Johnny to work repairing fences as far from the house as there were fences to fix. He had him tear down one of the old buildings in the abandoned mining town and use the lumber to build a line shack above South Pass. He had him out gathering half-wild remnants missed in the previous roundup. Hard jobs, all of them, but Johnny never complained. He worked and kept his mouth shut, wanting to get out from under.

The other cowboys knew what Johnny was doing. They knew he was paying off a debt. They also knew the story behind it—that Johnny Kennedy had come back to kill old Fred, and that now he was working to pay off a doctor bill. They wondered how it would end. What would Johnny do after the debt was paid?

That day finally came, and Johnny ate his last breakfast at the big house. All at the table knew he was leaving. No one mentioned it though, and old Fred, at the head of the table, ate quickly and silently, as he always did.

Ben had nothing to say either, except to outline the day's work. Then old Fred finished his coffee and got up, chair legs scraping on the tile floor. That signaled the end of the meal, and everyone filed outside. Johnny lingered. And Gwen looked at him with a troubled smile and waited for him to speak.

"I want to thank you," Johnny said, turning his hat in his hands. "That's something I should've done a long time ago, but I thought I'd wait till it was time for me to ride."

"You don't have to go, Johnny," she said impulsively.

For a short, doubtful moment he wondered if maybe she wasn't right. He could stay here and work, and maybe in time he would forget. But what had happened twelve years before was buried too deep. It was too much with him still. He couldn't kill Fred Corley now. He knew that. The moment for killing had passed, and to do so now would be anticlimax, a fool's gesture. But it didn't mean that he had forgiven old Fred, either. Far from it. And he knew he could never work for him and be at peace with himself. He looked down at his hat and said, "It wouldn't pan out. My feelings for him aren't dead by a long shot, and—"

"What about your feelings for me, Johnny?"

"That's different. But the other would come between us. Sooner or later we'd tangle because of it. We couldn't help that. You know it too." Johnny Kennedy's voice was wooden. "That's what I wanted to say. That and good-by."

The desire to beg him to stay leaped up in her, but she held it down. If anything came of what was between them, it would come because it was stronger than the hate he carried within himself.

"You'll be back and I'll be waiting, Johnny," was all she said. Then she stood close to him, smiling. Smiling straight into his eyes. Then she put her hands at the back of his neck and kissed him on the mouth, turned quickly and left the room.

Johnny went out and saddled his mare. Gwen, at an upstairs window, watched him riding away. He was heading to leave the valley by the South Pass. A few minutes later, her father trotted across the yard on his black stallion. He was going on his usual morning ride.

Johnny was out of the valley by late afternoon. After sundown, he fried his beans, boiled his coffee, and rolled up in his blanket, his feet to the coals. He wasn't sure what woke him up. The creak of leather, a footstep. He opened his eyes and sat up.

"Reach for your gun and you're a dead man," a voice said, and he recognized Ben Gancher's voice.

Somebody threw brush on the coals, the flames leaped up, and Johnny looked at a circle of grim faces. Most of them he recognized as old Fred's riders. Johnny blinked and moistened his lips. He recognized something in their faces, too. From long ago. From the time Fred Corley and the other two had hanged his father.

STEPPING forward, Ben prodded Johnny with the toe of his boot. He had a brand new coil of rope in his hand. His good-looking face was pale and tight. The man beside him was tall and thin, and wore a star on his buckskin vest. This was Bigelow, the deputy. His eyes were watchful and there was a determined set to his mouth.

Close to a dozen others stood around, their faces hard and dangerous. Johnny had a faint idea what this meant. There was a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"On your feet," Ben said. "You damn near did what you came here to do, and you're not getting another chance."

Bigelow said, "Stay out of this, Ben. He's my prisoner. I told you that when we rode out."

Ben gave the deputy an angry look. "Damn it, man, that was the second time he tried to kill Fred. Hang him and be done with it."

Bigelow's jaws just bunched a little harder. "If Fred had died, I'd say take him, boys. But he didn't. So this one will go to jail, and Fred'll prefer charges against him in the morning if he's able."

Somebody said, "Are we going to let him get away with that, Ben? Like as not Fred won't even bother to prefer charges. And next time—"

"Hold on!" Johnny's voice cracked in the tension and men turned their eyes on him. "I don't mind the company, but I'd like to know the reason for it. What's this about Fred Corley?"

"A good thing for you he ain't dead," Bigelow said. "One of you boys see if he carries a saddle gun."

"Yeah, an old Winchester," somebody said.

"See if it's been fired today."

"How in the hell am I supposed to tell?"

"Never mind that," Bigelow said. "Get his guns and throw a saddle on that mare of his."

"By God, I still say hang him," Ben Gancher said. He looked at Bigelow. "We should've kept you out of this."

"If you had I'd have come for you," Bigelow said mildly. He didn't take his eyes from Ben as he added, "On your feet, Kennedy."

A thin cold anger was rising in Johnny, but he had gathered enough from the talk and the sight of these men to understand that anything he said now would be just a waste of words. He got up as one of the riders brought the mare over, and Bigelow said, "Next to me, Kennedy," and then, "Somebody put that fire out. All right; let's go."

In the jail cell Johnny lay on the wooden bench and looked past the bars in the high window at a piece of blue sky. Steps came from the front, and Bigelow said, his

voice flat, "Someone to see you."

Johnny got up as the deputy went away; a moment later, Gwen stood outside the cell door. Johnny looked at her. What the devil was she doing here? He was suddenly furious. "You had no business coming here! What'll people say—"

"I don't care what they say, Johnny." Her voice was low, and she was faintly smiling. "I know you didn't shoot him, Johnny."

His voice rasped. "You don't know anything about it." He didn't want her mixed up in this, didn't want her to become involved in his troubles. He made himself look away from her.

"I know you didn't do it—you're not the type to shoot a man in cold blood, Johnny."

Then he turned his head. "Is that what happened?"

"Yes. Just as he was turning into Brush Canyon. Whoever shot him hid up there in the rocks, and it was natural for the men to think it was you."

"Was—he hurt bad?"

"The bullet creased his scalp, Johnny. It knocked him out. I looked for him when he didn't come back, and found him there. He's all right—just mad."

"I didn't do it," Johnny said.

"I know you didn't."

"Somebody figured it out. Somebody knew I'd get the blame. But who?"

"I don't know, Johnny. It might have been an accident."

"It wasn't an accident."

Voices came from Bigelow's office, and Gwen said, "There's Dad now." And then, quickly and urgently, she said, "Don't argue with him, Johnny. Please!"

BIGELOW came from his office, followed by Fred Corley and Ben Gancher.

"Don't be a damn fool, Fred," Ben was saying angrily. "Turn him loose and he'll only try it again."

"Your opinion wasn't asked," old Fred said testily. A white bandage showed beneath the brim of his black hat. He walked to the bars and looked through them at Johnny with faint loathing. "You're getting out of this country, and fast," he said. "And I'm giving my men orders to shoot on sight if ever again they see you on my property. Is that clear?"

Johnny pressed his lips together. The sharp points of rage he felt now were not directed at old Fred at all, but against the man who had figured to let him take the blame for something he hadn't done.

Old Fred Corley turned to the door, then hesitated and glanced at his daughter. "Are you coming back to the ranch with me, girl?" he demanded.

"Yes."

She smiled at Johnny and followed her father and Ben outside. Ben walked heavily around front, where he had tied his horse. He mounted as old Fred drove past in the buggy, Gwen on the seat beside him. They didn't look at Ben, and a feeling of utter dejection swept through him. He rode on to the saloon and brooded over a drink, finding small satisfaction in the fact that young Kennedy was leaving town. He sensed that there was still something between the youngster and the girl. Besides, he had failed in killing the old man, and his anger against Kennedy was suddenly beyond bearing. Johnny Kennedy was at the bottom of this whole wretched business. He was the one who had spoiled it for Ben with the girl, and it seemed to Ben now that he could see his future clearly, a damned ramrod for as long as the old man lived.

Had he put his shot a trifle lower—an inch at most—both the old man and Kennedy would have been out of the way. But he'd fouled up. Too eager. And it wasn't a stunt he dared pull again.

He glanced through the window toward the jail and saw Johnny coming along the street. He rode on past, heading north. Ben straightened a little against the bar, thinking that with young Kennedy out of the way for good, Gwen would change toward him. She might wait, thinking Kennedy would return, but in time she'd forget him. She was bound to. And who would question it if Kennedy disappeared?

Ben turned to the door, his stomach tense with excitement. He would follow Kennedy into the hills and kill him there. Dump him in an old arroyo scar and cover him up. By the time they found him—if he was ever found—he would be nothing but a skeleton. Ben went outside. Kennedy was already climbing the first long rise out of town and, when he was out of sight, Ben mounted and headed south. There were men in town who had marked Johnny Kennedy's departure, and it wouldn't do to have it said that Ben had followed him.

Ben rode a wide circle, and he rode hard, working up through the brush and rocks of the first foothills to a high point where he could look down on the road. When he gained his vantage point, he slid down, tied his horse and went on foot to a giant boulder. He took off his hat and edged past the boulder to look down. Johnny Kennedy was a speck on the road. Ben watched him for a moment, then looked along the road ahead of the rider to where he could come down for his shot. When he glanced back at Johnny, he frowned. What was the young fool up to? He had turned from the road and was following a dim trail through the scrub trees and the brush. Ben swore softly. The sun was almost down. In another hour it would be gone, and time was precious. He ran back to his horse.

Ten minutes later, he came out on the road where Kennedy had turned. Ben rode cautiously. Did Kennedy suspect that he was being followed? Ben guessed not. But he turned from the trail nevertheless and climbed up below the rim. After a mile or so, he spotted Johnny ahead and below. A thoughtful look settled on Ben's face. Young Kennedy was following the hills that rimmed the basin like the edge of a pie plate. He was working back toward the ranch. Then he was past the ranch and Ben knew where he was going.

A cloud of scarlet and gold tanagers swarmed through the brush, disappeared into the canyon's mouth. Young Kennedy had dropped down to the road, and Ben urged his horse up over the ridge in a lunging gallop, then rode him hard and stopped when he knew the old mining town lay directly below.

What he saw when he looked down, convinced him that he had been right. Johnny Kennedy was just turning into the rickety livery at the end of the street; a moment later he came out on foot, the Winchester in the crook of his arm.

Ben slipped back to his horse. He had seen enough. There was no doubt in his mind. Kennedy would hole up till morning, knowing the old man always came this way on his morning ride. Ben was grinning as he mounted and turned for the ranch. The young fool was still after Fred's scalp, and this time, Ben thought, I'll wait till he lifts it. And I'll be here to lift his in turn!

CHAPTER IV

Ghost Town

NOT much was left of the old mining town. The narrow street was rutted and baked, weed-grown, and the few buildings that remained huddled like dirty sheep in the dim light.

Somewhere a coyote howled, and from up the slope came the trickling sound of a spring. Otherwise the place was silent as a tomb.

Johnny stopped in the middle of the street and looked up canyon, where he could just see the ruins of the crushing mill and rusty machinery around a mine shaft. Gray ridges of tailing marked the slopes behind town. There wasn't a sign of life.

He walked to the first building—the old hotel—and went gingerly up the rotting, shaky stairs to the second and top floor. Little clouds of fine dust choked his nostrils as he walked across the boards. There was an iron bedstead, complete with springs, in one corner of the room; a lamp

with a broken chimney; a backless chair. Yellowed newspapers lay scattered along the floor, and a rat scurried up the wall and out the window as Johnny entered.

He fanned dust from the chair with his hat and sat down, sensing that he had been lucky so far. He knew he had taken a chance in coming back. But Fred Corley would ride this way early in the morning. Maybe the killer would try his luck again. But not from a distance. Not again. Sure, the killer would make certain next time. He would want a sure shot to finish the job. And this abandoned mining town was one place where he could get it. . . .

That was the setting for the drama to be enacted in the abandoned mining town. Maybe ghosts chuckled that morning as old Fred Corley came riding up the trail. Fred's hawk eyes peered from under bushy brows as he rode along, and they missed little. He had a gun at his waist and a rifle across the pommel. Maybe he sensed that this thing that had started twelve years before hadn't ended. He looked ahead. If it happened at all, it would happen there, in the town. For beyond the canyon was open country, and not even that young fool would try his luck there. Old Fred worked the lever of the rifle. The cartridge shot home. He was ready for whatever lay ahead.

Ben Gancher saw the old man too. Ben had circled and come down canyon. He had left his horse behind the ruins of the crushing mill and was working his way through the town. Looking past the edge of what had been a miner's supply store, he saw old Fred coming in the distance.

Young Kennedy was down there in the hotel, Ben guessed. He went on along the backs of the buildings opposite until he came to the rear door of the old assay office. The door hung open on rusty hinges that creaked as Ben stepped inside. He stepped across the room to the boarded window that faced the street. The boards were cracked and shrunken with age, and he could not see the old man now, only the hotel. He looked for what seemed a long time before he saw movement behind the opening of a second floor window.

Johnny had seen the old man as he entered the canyon. He had seen the black gleam of the stallion's hide in the early sunlight, and the straight figure in the saddle. And the rifle old Fred held across the pommel.

But there had been no sign of a third party. None at all. Then suddenly he heard a creaking sound, and there was no wind. The morning air was perfectly calm. What had made the sound? Johnny moved quickly to a side window and looked out. The buildings across the street were all one story. All was still. But the noise had been there. It had been made by something alive. A small animal? Johnny doubted it. No, someone was hiding there, waiting behind boarded windows. He scrutinized each window carefully. Nothing.

Old Fred Corley came riding. Johnny could hear the clop of the stallion's hoofs. Then Fred came in sight. He passed below the window in the street, looking straight ahead. From the corner of his eyes, Johnny saw something moving between the boards that covered a window across the street.

The impatience of waiting for young Kennedy to shoot had been more than Ben could bear, and he had showed the barrel of his gun between the boards and had taken aim at the old man's back.

Johnny saw the black line of the barrel as it moved.

FOR the barest second there was a tug-of-war inside Johnny. Let whoever was down there shoot. Let him kill old Fred. Isn't that why he, Johnny Kennedy, had come here in the first place? Isn't that what he had planned to do for twelve long years? And had failed to do? Now he didn't have to fail, for the finger that pulled the trigger wouldn't be his. And he could get away. He was sure of it.

Johnny had his gun at his shoulder. Suddenly he knew he couldn't let the old man die. Not this way. Not with a bullet in the back. Not without a warning. Hadn't the old man warned Johnny's

father twice?

He would do wrong to let Fred Corley die now. He knew that just as clearly as he knew that he had not been justified in coming back to try and kill the old man. For the quarrel hadn't been his. It had been settled twelve years before, by a rope. Fred Corley had protected his own, and in a way Johnny was protecting his own now. His reputation, really. For whoever was across the street, who waited there, keyed to kill, was taking something from Johnny when he attempted to put the blame of Fred Corley's death on him. And Johnny had the right to protect that which was himself as much as old Fred had the right to protect his property.

Johnny fired. Twice. One shot came from across the street. Old Fred heard the shots. He heard the sound of a bullet as it hissed past him. He nudged the stallion around and faced it—and saw Johnny, head and shoulders out of the hotel window, firing once more into the building across the street. And Johnny turned his head and yelled, "Get behind something, you fool!"

The old man's eyes were puzzled. He didn't move. He had always ignored death, as he ignored it now. He was only astonished at what he saw and heard. Then he heard something else—the crash as a door burst open. Ben Gancher came through it. There was something wrong with his face, his eyes. From the high window, Johnny called, "Drop that gun, Ben!"

But Ben didn't drop the gun. Even now, when all was certainty, everything had gone wrong. And Ben, caught up by something too much for him to handle, swept on the tide of his own making, couldn't stop himself now. It was too late. Obscure pride, jealousy and hate combined to drive all logic from his brain. Maybe he knew then that he had lost, but this only added to his wild rage. And so he came at a stumbling run to do the only thing left for him to do—kill both the old man and Johnny Kennedy, if possible.

Old Fred Corley knew it. His mind flashed back through the years and saw it all in a moment. Maybe he had never completely trusted Ben Gancher. Maybe that was why he had always kept a tight rein on his ranch. He lifted his rifle.

"Kennedy warned you once," he said. "And I'm warning you the second time!" Ben kept coming, gun in hand, bringing it up to fire. "Twice is enough to tell any man," old Fred said. His shot dropped Ben face-down in the street.

Johnny came down. He and the old man looked at each other, and the younger man's father no longer stood between them. They both knew it then, were certain of it.

"Why didn't you tell me it wasn't you who took a shot at me the first time—" old Fred began, then cut himself short. "Of course not. I wouldn't have believed you. I'm a fool. Why didn't you let him get away with it?"

"I couldn't."

"Of course not," Fred Corley said again. "There's no crying in you. You're like your father that way. He butchered my beef because he needed the food." The old man nodded. "That's what he did. What he didn't know was that I'd have given him a steer now and then if he'd asked. He didn't. He didn't cry when he paid, either."

"I know that," Johnny said.

The old man's face was gaunt, his eyes angry. He glanced at Ben's body. "I've been stopped once this week from riding across my land, and I don't like it. It pleases me to see what I've accomplished, and it pleases me still more to know I can still take care of my own." Did a thin smile crack the old man's stern features? Johnny wasn't sure. "Maybe the times have passed when taking care of one's own means something. I don't know. But I do know that a man has to do certain things if he wants to live with himself. I'm not going to be stopped today from enjoying my pleasure. And the pleasure will be increased if you will ride with me. When we stop in town for our drink, we can notify the deputy sheriff about this business."

IT WAS in Johnny to explain what he was doing there, why he'd come back. But he knew now that he didn't have to.

"I'll ride with you," he said.

"One more thing—" Old Fred's eyes were hard, not searching, under his heavy brows. "I'd like you to stay. Call it a favor, something I've never asked a man. But I'll do so now. You'll make a top hand. In time you may make a foreman I can trust. No, I trust you now, and we'll never mention that again."

Fred Corley didn't mention Gwen, either. He knew how she felt about Johnny, but that was her business. Those things happened naturally, as they would have happened long ago had Ben been the man for her.

Old Fred followed Johnny up the street to the livery, and then they rode on through town. They both rode high in the saddle. From a distance, it was hard to tell who was the young man and who the old.

That's the story Pat Dord told the whisky drummer one morning in his office. That's how Johnny Kennedy came to work for old Fred Corley, the man he had come to kill. The drummer sat with his chin on his chest, listening, as pictures formed and moved in his brain. When Pat finished speaking, he gave a long sigh.

"So that's the rope that hanged Tom Kennedy," he murmured. And because curiosity got the better of him, he added, "But what's it doing here?"

Pat smiled. "I got it from the former owner. Felt I had to. Times die hard in a man, drummer, and the rope reminds me how they have changed." He hesitated the fraction of a second. "I said three men hanged Tom Kennedy. Old Fred was one of them. Ben was another. I was the third."

"So that's it," the drummer said softly.

"That's it." Pat Dord got up. He opened the door leading to the saloon. "Now we'll have a drink. I think—" He looked back at the drummer. "Do you see that man at the bar?" he said softly. "The tall slender one with the black hair just beginning to gray? That's Johnny Kennedy."

The drummer looked past the open door. He saw the tall man, and beside him a shorter, stockier man, young, with reddish blond hair. They were both having a drink.

"Who's that with him?" the drummer whispered.

"His son." Pat Dord smiled. "Name of Fred. He's been riding with Johnny almost a year now. They go out every morning, the way old Fred used to do. And they always stop in here for a drink."

The drummer's curiosity was satisfied at last. He had learned the whole of the story and, looking at those two at the bar, he knew it had been worth while listening to. Not a legend. Nothing like the tales concerning the names that would go down in history. But part of that history nevertheless. And it was the movement that counted, after all.

"Want to meet them?" Pat Dord asked.

"I'd like to," the drummer murmured. "I'd like very much to meet them."

THEY were Texas men—tough-looking men with six-shooters at their thighs and rifles on their saddles. And they rode into a land historically hostile to Texans—the Territory of New Mexico. But when a Texan rode west, he had a reason: rustled cattle! . . . In the next issue of WEST ride with the Lone Star rannies in—

TEXANS WEST!

***A novel of stolen cattle by* JOSEPH CHADWICK**

STAMPEDE to FREEWATER

by Francis H. Ames

Pete Aragon fled from his fears just once,
but after that he stayed and fought them!

THE rails of the Chicago and Western had built north through the Dakotas, and the wild rush for land was on. It was akin to the madness of men for gold, this fever for free land, only there was more substance to it. Gold was but yellow dust that a man could dream about, while prairie land, one hundred and sixty acres of it, was something that took men by the throats, choking them with emotion.

Pete Aragon had been riding a day and a night, when he came upon the wagon, just across the Montana border, drawn by four horses strung out. It had

been a tough ride, across the badlands that lay between the Dakotas lightly treed savannahs and Montana's heavily grassed, treeless plains. It was good country here in Montana, the best that Aragon had ever seen. A man could draw a new breath here, and the fear that had driven Aragon died, leaving him bitter and ashamed.

Looking back, Aragon could not recall that he'd ever run before, let panic take him by the throat. The wish came to him that he might never again be placed in a position where death stared him in the face, for it made a man feel small and insignificant. I'll run this once, he thought, and make it a good run. I'll ride clean out of this homestead stampede country, where every cattleman and his crew is a deadly enemy of a man who has a land hungry look in his eyes. I wouldn't want to run twice—it might get to be a habit.

Aragon wasn't an exceptionally large man, yet there was a hint of solidness about him that made him seem larger than he was. He had a good pair of shoulders and his wrists and neck were strong and sinewy. His dark hair and beard was badly in need of trimming. Now the thoughtfulness had been driven from his face by fatigue. He rode a pot-bellied bay mare, much too large an animal for saddle use, with harness marks on flanks and shoulder.

Aragon pulled up by the wagon, sprawling in his saddle, letting his weariness have its way with him, and only his light gray eyes seemed to be alertly alive. A cold, October drizzle, driven by a biting wind, brought dripping moisture to his beard.

"Howdy," he said. "Where are you bound, friend?"

The wagon man was short, middle-aged, and the tight anger in his face brought instant caution to Aragon. His eyes met Aragon's squarely, and then they shifted to the two men who were riding up from the rear.

"Watch 'em," he warned. "They're Walking L riders."

ARAGON swung the mare about as the two came up. They sat and looked at him with insolent amusement.

"Which one's the horse, Bert?" the tall, thin man asked.

Bert pulled an overflowing paunch back from the saddle bulge, cocked a leather-chapped leg around the horn, and attempted to roll a smoke as his eyes moved over Aragon and his rig. Water dripped from the Walking L rider's floppy hat brim and the cigarette came apart in his hands. He cursed as he flung it aside.

"The one on the bottom is the man," he said, and his eyes were quarrelsome. "I can tell by the ears."

Aragon had been ribbed before, in many cow camps, and he knew that such talk can easily be parried by tossing it back.

"You're dead right," he said, and he smiled. "Horse played out on me—I had to carry her."

The remark seemed to bring anger to the thin man. He rammed his horse closer to Aragon's heavy bay. "None of your lip, cowboy," he snapped. "Where the hell did you come from?"

"The Dakotas," Aragon said, and he could feel the fear begin to crawl up his spine. The fear angered him, and he added, "If it's any of your damned business."

"It's my business," the thin man said. "I'm Shad Harder, foreman for Sid Cromell's Walking L. I got orders to keep drifters off our range. Get going, mister."

Get going, move on. They were the same old words, and in Dakota cattlemen had punctuated the words with rifle slugs, kicking up dust on Aragon's back trail. Thinking about how he had run in panic, after they had torn down his soddy, killed one of his team and shot his gelding saddle bronc, fanned the smouldering anger that was in Aragon. He had ridden as far as he could. His horse, at least, must have rest. A man can run only so far, and then nerves and muscles call a halt.

"I'm Pete Aragon," he said, "and I'm too damned tired to be stampeded, Harder. Prod me, and one of us ain't going any further."

His statement surprised him, but with the words out, he found himself strangely glad that he had said them, and the fatigue in his body seemed to flow away, leaving him rested and alert.

Harder took the words like a slap in the face. He cursed as he catapulted his horse into Aragon's bay. The heavy work mare planted her splayed hoofs solidly, braced to meet the impact. The collision of the two horses jolted the thin man forward in his hull, and Aragon, suddenly releasing his pent up anger, wound his quirt around the man's skinny neck with all his strength. Aragon yanked on the quirt as it struck, and Harder tumbled off between the two horses. As he landed, he fired upward from the ground, the slug puncturing Aragon's hat brim.

A shotgun boomed out from the wagon seat, and the fat rider brought his horse up on its haunches, and then he toppled over its rump, to lie in the mud, a gun in his wide flung hand, the rain beating into his moon face. Harder fired from the ground again, this time at the driver of the wagon.

Aragon plunged out of the saddle, landing on top of Harder, grasping his gun arm, twisting it until the gun dropped. He lifted Harder by the shirt front, and deliberately struck him on the point of the jaw with a clubbed fist. The blow seemed to move slowly, yet it drove Harder's head back, putting him out as though he'd been bashed with an ax handle.

Aragon looked up to see the wagon driver slowly lean over, his hands pressed to his chest, and then he toppled to the ground to land between the rear team and the double tree.

A woman's cry came from beneath the canvas of the wagon, and a slim figure catapulted over the seat, to drop down between the milling horses. Aragon grasped the bit of the nigh horse on the wheel team, scooping the reins from the rumps of the leaders.

"Easy there, boys," his voice soothed them.

The woman dragged the man from beneath the shuffling hoofs, and Aragon dropped bit and rein to kneel beside him, ripping open his shirt, laying his ear to his chest. He was still for a long moment and when he looked up his face was lined with sadness.

"I'm sorry, lady," he said to her. "He's dead."

THE girl seemed to be about eighteen, slim and brown eyed, with the rain curling her hair about her cheeks. She was a woman such as Aragon had not seen in a long time, young and wholly desirable. Aragon saw the jolt of his words hit her, saw her eyes widen with it, and then her anger came. She clawed at Aragon's face, with quick tears in her eyes.

"You did it," she cried. "Uncle Cort wanted to fight them, but I kept him from it. He was safe until you came along—you murderer."

Aragon grasped her shoulders and shook her.

"Get hold of yourself, lady," he said.

Out of the corner of his eye Aragon saw Harder come to his knees, his hand going as instinctively to his empty holster as a skunk elevates his tail when disturbed. Aragon drove at him, lifted him, spun him around, held him with one hand and a knee in the middle of his back while he ripped off his belt.

"Wiggle," he gritted in his ear, "and I'll break your damned neck."

The man cursed and struggled, and Aragon batted him on the side the head, knocking his hat off. He jerked the looped belt around Harder's wrists and tied them. He shoved the resisting man up on his horse and lifted the body of Bert on his own, tying the reins to Harder's saddle horn.

"Take him home and plant him, Harder," he said. "And don't come back. This ain't no more Walking L range than it is mine. It's government land."

Harder sat and looked at him, and his beady, pinpointing eyes brought fear back to Aragon again. Here was a man that he could handle as easily as he might wrestle a yearling calf, yet this man would kill him the next time they met, as surely as

the sun would rise in the morning. The mark of the gunman was on Harder, the slim hands, the coiled, ready look, the cold deadliness of his eyes.

"You ain't got long to live, Aragon," he said, and he rode away to the north, steering his mount with his knees.

Watching him ride away Aragon knew that the very thought of meeting Harder again frightened him. He was scared as hell. An urgency came to him to ride on, not stopping until he crossed the Powder River and topped the Bighorns into Wyoming country that was so desolate that there would never be a homestead rush for land. A man could spend a lifetime there, working for thirty and found, and forget that at heart he was a coward.

He turned around, to see the woman backed against the wheel, her frightened eyes watching him, and he knew that he had to do something about her before he rode away. Her words, blaming him for her Uncle Cort's death, had bitten deep in Aragon. A man could run in this country or he could fight, and either brought disaster to someone. It was a hell of a place.

"Who are you?" he asked her. "What were you and your uncle doing here? Where do you want to go now?"

"I'm Mel Spear," she said, and her voice was defiant. "Uncle Cort and I filed on claims on Drift Creek. It's the only place that I have to go."

She didn't look old enough to file on land. Even infants toddled out on the plains to take up homesteads. And then his eyes took in the curving of her bosom, the slimness of her waist, and he knew that she was older than he had thought—she could be twenty-one.

"Men are beasts," she said, and her voice became wild. "They fight and they kill, they—"

"What would you have had me do?" he asked, his face, usually pleasant, now twisted into a scowl.

"All you had to do was ignore them," she said. "Let them curse and threaten like the beasts they are. Ignore them and what can they do?"

HER line of reasoning baffled him, and he turned away. Carefully he wrapped Cort Spear's body in a blanket and lifted it into the rear of the wagon. He tossed Spear's shotgun in after him, and then he tied the bay mare to the rear. He walked up to her and took her firmly by the arm, half boosting her up on the high seat. Then he went around and got up himself. He hauled on the off line, starting the horses in a wide swing to send them back the way that they had come, but she reached over and gripped the reins with a strength that surprised him.

"I'm going to my homestead," she cried, "and you can't stop me! No one can stop me!"

He looked at her and saw her chin come up stubbornly, and then he knew that the land fever had its hold on her, and that she could not be turned away. She's small and delicate and beautiful, he thought, yet she can't be made to run away from her homestead as I ran away from mine, and once more he found himself ashamed.

He could see the trace where the wagon had passed before, and he drove north and west on it. They rode for a mile or more silently, and then she said, "Shad Harder said that he'd kill you. Get on your horse and ride before he does. You have no land to hold you?"

It was a question and he answered it.

"I did have a homestead," he said flatly, "and I let them run me away from it—I'm a running man."

She was silent, and presently they came up a long, high ridge, and from the summit Aragon could see the badlands, through which he had so recently ridden. They came down the steep incline, the wheelers braced back against the pole, Aragon's boot against the brake lever. The wagon slewed on the wet grass, and he felt the girl clutch at his coat, and then he swung the leaders to kill the slew and they came down into the bottoms on the run. The trace turned here, up a small waterway, and in a sheltered arm of the draw, Aragon saw the two-roomed shack of boards and tar paper, the three-sided pole

barn, the few dismal chickens picking about the yard in the drizzle. Looking at the place, he felt a swelling in his chest, a desire to build her a better place than this, one that would be fit for a queen, and the feeling was a strange thing to him.

"This is it," she said, and there was pride in her voice.

Aragon hauled up and looked at the land, and he knew that he had seen none better—water and grass and badland winter shelter close at hand, with cedar posts and firewood in the crevasses of the buttes.

"The west quarter's mine," she said, "and the east quarter belonged to Uncle Cort. We built the house on the line, one room on each side."

It was the custom, when two people lived together on separate claims. It satisfied the government's rule that residence must be made for six months every year for three years. Aragon found himself thinking of Uncle Cort's land, vacated by his death, and he found himself wanting it. A man with land like this, and a woman like this to side him, would be one jump from heaven; and then he cursed himself for the thought, and got down to stable the horses.

He got a shovel from the wagon and went out on a knoll to dig a grave. When the grave was deep enough, he got Cort Spear's body and put it in. Soon he saw Mel Spear coming toward him, holding out a Bible, offering it to him. Her eyes were sad.

Aragon took the Bible and he fumbled through its pages with his big, awkward hands, and then he snapped it shut and thrust it in his pocket.

"O Lord," he prayed, in his deeply timbered voice. "We gather here to deliver this man into Your hands. He gave his life that I might live. He struck against tyranny, that it might be driven back, and the faith of all men in You be preserved. Receive Cort Spear, Oh Lord, and let him ride Your ranges in peace forever. Amen."

Aragon grasped the shovel and began to fill the grave. The girl stood with uncovered head, the rain glistening in her brown hair, and when the job was done she said, "Thank you, Pete Aragon. You'd better go now. Shad Harder may come here looking for you."

He thought of Shad Harder, and of his eyes, and the way he wore his gun, low, with the black butt ever ready to his hand. Aragon had owned a gun, and he had shot rattlesnakes and sick cows with it, but the cattlemen had taken the gun away from him in the Dakotas. Thinking of Shad Harder, riding looking for him, brought the fear to the pit of his stomach, and he felt weak and sick. He turned away and got on the bay mare and rode south without looking back.

AFTER a while he came to a town, and he saw that the newly laid rails of the Chicago and Western ended here. It was a boom town and a sign on the depot said that it was Freewater. Some jokester had written boldly beneath the name, in red crayon, the words "Hell's Passage." There were many people milling around the street, but all that Aragon could see was the sign of a cafe on a tent covered structure. He was ravenously hungry, and he would eat before he went on. Harder would not be in town yet, to spread the news, to look for him, for he had ridden north with Bert's body, and he wouldn't have time yet.

Aragon stabled the mare and saw that she got oats and hay, and then he went in and ate. He ate wolfishly, eager to be gone, watching the street, so that he would see Harder first if he rode in. He heard two men talking, and he knew that they were cattlemen. One of them said:

"There's a bunch of Walking L beef in Sand canyon. Tell Cromell if you see him."

"I will," the other man said. "Sid's in the saloon now. I'll see him before he leaves town."

Aragon finished his meal, and as he ate he thought about Sid Cromell being in town. Cromell was the owner of the Walking L, the man who had ordered Shad Harder and Bert to run folks away from land that belonged to them, for every

American jointly owned the public domain. Sid Cromell had used it, free of charge, to build up his riches, and now he clutched at it with greedy fingers when the people wanted to take back a part of that which they had let him use for a time.

Shad Harder was the man who had fired the shot that had killed Mel Spear's uncle. Harder was the man that had ordered Aragon to run again, and keep running. Yet it was Cromell who hired these men, sent them on their deadly errands, while he lolled in the saloon in town, not knowing and not caring about the death and the misery he caused. Aragon found a hot anger rowelling him against Cromell. He paid for his food and he went out the door. He turned toward the livery and his horse, and then he saw the saloon across the street. He went across, knowing that he must see this man Cromell before he left, tell him that Cort Spear was dead, killed by one of his men.

He went into the saloon. It was a crowded, noisy place, and Aragon could pick out the cattlemen from the nesters without any trouble. The cattlemen stood by the bar with bold, insolent eyes; the nesters stood apart, cautious and fearful. Aragon had always followed cattle, and he looked the part. The bartender didn't hesitate when he asked him to point out Sid Cromell.

Cromell sat alone at a table, reading *The Miles City News,* a black cigar cocked in his mouth, a glass of beer on the table before him. He was a broad shouldered, beefy man, with a face florid from good living. He wore broadcloth pants, and a softly tanned leather jerkin. His neckerchief was held together at his throat by a gold band. Aragon could see the dull gleam of the black leather of his gun belt beneath the table, and the winking rims of the brass cartridges in it. Cromell took his ease, just as though his men had not killed Mel Spear's uncle today, toppling him in the mud beneath his horses.

Cromell hired men that got paid thirty and found. Few of them would ever be able to save enough money from this to file on land. buy the necessary team and harness, wagon and plow. Cromell paid gunmen like Harder more, but Harder would never want to settle down—such a man didn't dare.

Aragon had come north from Wyoming, lured by news of big wages on the grading of the Chicago and Western Railway. He had bought the team and put them to work. The three dollars a day the railroad paid him for himself and the team had done something to him that thirty and found had never been able to do. The extra money had made him think of the future, and to him the future meant land, a house of his own, and a wife and kids.

When he'd saved enough money he'd bought the wagon and gone north, up the Missouri River, looking for land. He'd found it and he had filed on it, built his house. And then they had taken it away from him. They had thought it was a good joke to shoot his saddle horse and one of his work team, mount him on the old mare and skip rifle slugs along his back trail as he had run. Perhaps Cromell would think it was a good joke that Shad Harder had tumbled Cort Spear down from his wagon seat with a forty-five slug.

PETE ARAGON went over to Cromell and he stood looking down at the man. Cromell looked up and his eyes were coldly authoritative. They went over Aragon, seeing his mud splattered garments, the torn Stetson, where Harder's bullet had passed upward, barely missing the skull. Cromell's eyes were faintly yellow.

"Cort Spear is dead," Aragon told him. "You had your men kill him. I'm going to beat hell out of you, Cromell. Get up!"

Cromell came to his feet, and he seemed to be a much larger man standing than he had appeared to be when seated. "That," he growled, "is something I'd like to see, friend."

Aragon took a short step forward, and he slapped the man open handed, so hard that he staggered back, and then Aragon drove his fist solidly into his face, driving him over the table in a crash of splintering wood.

Cromell was half up, when Aragon drove, boots first, over the wreckage, his heels smashing against Cromell's chest. And then Aragon was on him, squeezing his throat with one hand as he pummeled him in the face with the other. A small, weasely man, who looked as if he might have been helper to a camp cook all of his life, took a savage swing at Aragon's head with a beer bottle. Aragon ducked and the bottle smashed off its end on the edge of a pool table. The little man jabbed the broken glass at Aragon's face, slashing it across his forehead, leaving the flesh hanging down, bringing blood to blind him.

Aragon roared as he came up from the prostrate Cromell. He grappled with the little man, whirling him around, ramming his back to the wall, lifting his knee sharply into his belly. Aragon couldn't see anything now, but it seemed to him that the room was thunderous with stamping feet, loud curses, the crashing of furniture. And then something hit him on the head and he sank into blackness . . . .

When consciousness returned he found himself lying in tall grass, with the stars overhead and a quarter moon poking over the horizon. Sitting up, he could see the lights on the street of Freewater, hardly a quarter of a mile away. He heard the snorting of a horse, and he got to his feet. He waited for the world to stop spinning about and he set his will against the pounding in his head. He went toward the sound and the bay mare whickered at him. He leaned against her while he thought about it.

Someone had taken him out of the saloon and tied a bandage around the wound on his forehead. Somebody had carried him out here and brought his horse from the livery. Walking L hadn't wanted to kill him in cold blood. Too many people had seen the fight. Maybe they were giving him a chance to run again, or maybe Shad Harder was waiting in the dark shadows for him to get up and ride. Then Harder wouldn't have to kill Aragon while he was unconscious. Probably Shad Harder was touchy about such things.

Pete Aragon got in the saddle and he set his course to ride around the town. Once around it he could strike out for the Powder and Wyoming. For the first time he noticed the bulk in one of his pockets, and he drew out Mel Spear's Bible. He had forgotten to give it back to her. A man couldn't ride out of the country with a woman's Bible. He turned the mare north.

He came down on the homestead shack on Drift creek late in the evening, seeing the dim light shining through the oiled paper shade of the window. She was all right. Nothing would ever happen to her. She would just ignore folks who came ramming around, looking for trouble. He went up to the door and knocked, calling out his name. He heard her tell him to come in, and he did.

She was standing with her back to the stove and he could smell hot coffee in the room. Her eyes were frightened and there was a welt across her face. The shoulder of her dress was torn, exposing her breast. Aragon felt fear rise again, and this time it was for her. He took a quick step forward, and Sid Cromell shut the door behind him, poking a gun in his back. Shad Harder stood in the corner and his gun was trained on Mel Spear.

"We knew you'd come, you fool," Harder gloated. "Nothing traps a man quicker than a pretty face."

CROMELL shoved Aragon in the corner and threatened him with the gun. Cromell didn't look so well. His face was a mess of battered flesh, with the yellow eyes deadly. Looking at him, Aragon was puzzled. Why had they set a trap for him here, when they had had him in their hands in Freewater? Why had they left him his horse so he could ride away? It occurred to Aragon that he must have a friend in Freewater, and he wondered who it could be.

"Say something, you fool," Cromell yelled, and he slapped Aragon across the face.

"He's scared speechless," Harder said. "He's as yellow as they come."

"There's nothing to say," Aragon said slowly. "What do you want?"

"He asks us what we want!" Harder's chuckle sent cold shivers up Aragon's back.

Cromell pulled back the hammer of his Colt.

"I should shoot you," he said, "but I'm a soft hearted man, Aragon. Harder is going to hold a gun on you, while I beat you to a pulp. You'll live, but your brains will be addled. After that we'll toss you in Miss Spear's wagon, and she'll drive you east. There ain't going to be any homesteaders along Drift Creek."

"I'm not going anywhere," Aragon said, and his voice was utterly weary. "Shoot me and leave my body—I don't give a damn."

"And the lady?" Harder's voice was vicious. "You won't have to worry about her, Aragon. I'm a lady's man—I'll take care of her."

"You wouldn't dare!" Mel Spear's voice was contemptuous. "Don't let them bluff you, Pete. Tell them to go to hell."

"Maybe we should just ignore them," Aragon said, and he smiled at her.

"You lousy swine," he said to Cromell, and he started walking toward him.

Harder's gun came around from Mel and there was an eagerness to kill in his face.

"I'll take him, boss," he said gleefully.

Mel's move was so quick, so unexpected, that it took Harder by surprise. She hurled the contents of the boiling coffee pot into his face. He screamed as his weapon exploded through the roof. Aragon went down in a long dive, and Cromell's bullet passed over his head. He got his arms around Cromell's ankles and he pulled him down. He twisted the gun from his hand, and as both men came up, Aragon racked the barrel savagely across his head, cutting his scalp from temple to chin, staggering him back against the wall.

Harder was too much the trained, instinctive gunman to be stopped by scalding coffee. He thumped a shot at Aragon but Mel joggled his arm, throwing the bullet wide. Aragon tossed the gun aside, driving his shoulder into Harder, slamming him against the wall. He grabbed the gun wrist, took a step back, and drove his mallet fist squarely into his face. The blow was a tremendous thing. The back of Harder's head hit the boards of the cabin wall and made them vibrate against the two-by-fours to which they were nailed.

Aragon let him drop, wheeling toward Cromell, even as the big rancher scooped up the gun and trained it on his chest.

"You're all through, Aragon," he said. "This time you get it dead center."

Aragon braced himself to take the lead, knowing that he was afraid and not caring now. Cromell's thumb hooked back the hammer.

The sound of rapidly approaching hoof beats was heard outside the cabin. Cromell eased up on the hammer and smiled.

"My crew," he said. "We'll make it a neck-tie party, Aragon. It's a better show."

The horses milled about the cabin and then a thin, shrill voice called out, "You all right, Miss Spear? This is Jack Woolford."

"They're not your men," Mel cried out. "They're homesteaders."

SID CROMELL backed into a corner, where he could cover Mel and Aragon, and the door.

"She's all right," he yelled, "but she won't be if you try to come in."

"That's Sid Cromell," someone outside said. "Harder and Aragon are in there, too. I know their horses."

"We've got the place surrounded," Jack Woolford's voice said. "We'll stay here until you starve to death, Cromell, if necessary. Come out with your hands up and you can go home."

"Why should I," Cromell's voice gloated. "My crew will be here any minute, and then you land grabbers will get what you're looking for."

There was complete silence now. It

seemed to Aragon that ten minutes passed, and then he heard the hoofs coming in at the run.

"Spread out!" he called to the homesteaders. "Take cover!"

"To hell with that," Jack Woolford's voice was cocky. "We've sneaked around as much as we've a mind to, Aragon. Get them scatterguns cocked, boys! Here they come."

"On the floor, Mel!" Aragon's hand gave her a push. It sent the girl sprawling to the side and down, and Cromell's gun followed her.

Aragon took the split second to drive across the room, side stepping the gun as it swung back, catching Cromell's arm by wrist and shoulder, bringing his leg up. Aragon's muscles heaved as he broke the rancher's arm at the elbow, over his knee.

Cromell screamed and the gun clattered to the floor, and then Aragon was outside among the homesteaders.

"Spread out, you fools," he yelled. "Take cover. Walking L will target you against the building."

There seemed to Aragon to be pitifully few of the homesteaders, perhaps six or eight, but they scattered like quail now, melting into the bottom grass along the creek. The Walking L riders topped the hill, hauled up, milled about, and then they came down at a walk. Aragon let them come until they were hardly ten paces away, before he stepped out from the shadow of the house.

"Hold it," he said. "That's far enough."

The group hauled up, and their horses began to spread out craftily. These were men schooled in range warfare and Aragon knew that his surprise would hold them but a moment.

"Careful," he warned. "There's a dozen shotguns on you. Better chew the rag before you start anything."

"We didn't come to talk," a rough, gritty voice said. "Walking L ain't much on jawbone."

"Thirty and found," Aragon jeered, "is your pay. You won't save much on that. Some day you'll want land and a home of your own, and a wife and kids that go with it. Are you going to die to fight against your own cause? Why help Cromell hold the whole damned country? It belongs to you, not to him. Sooner or later he'll go down and you'll go down with him."

"Cort Spear," the gritty voice said, "killed Bert Tolberg. Shot him out of his saddle with a shotgun."

"He did," Aragon said. "The fat jasper had a cocked gun in his fist when he flopped. Ever noticed how a shotgun raises hell with a man?"

Jack Woolford's thin voice crackled. "That's right. I've got a scattergun on your belly now, Mort."

"Where's Cromell?" Mort's voice sounded frightened. "He's the one who runs this show."

There was no need to answer that.

[*Turn page*]

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Cromell came out of the house, one arm raised, the other dangling at his side. Behind him walked Mel Spear, holding Uncle Cort's shotgun at his back, and both hammers stood at full cock. Cromell was a battered, beaten man. Aragon knew that Harder would never walk out of the cabin. He'd have to be carried. He'd never fan another gun, or kill another man. His head just wasn't that hard.

"We came for land," Aragon said flatly, "and we came legally. Now pick up these two damned skunks of yours and cart 'em out of here."

"He's right," a Walking L man said. "Cromell's trying to hog the whole country. I'm quitting when we get back to the ranch. I know a dandy quarter section, up on Peavine ridge—"

"Shut up," Mort growled, "and lug Harder out'n that shack. He's stiff in there or we'd have heard from him."

AFTER the Walking L men were gone, Jack Woolford shook Aragon's hand. He was a grizzled old man, spare as an alder rail, with a kindly face and a broad smile.

"We took a hand," he said, "in that ruckus you started in town. We heard what you told Cromell, so we figured you were one of us. We managed to lug you out of there, and then we headed for Drift Creek, to see if Mel was all right. Took us a little time to get the boys organized—us homesteaders must stick together."

"Running," one of the men said, "ain't no good. I tried it one time."

The homesteaders drifted out, each to a shack that was little better than a one-stall barn, but sitting on land that held a promise of better things to come. They were men who had made themselves free, and intended to remain free—they owned land!

Aragon took the Bible from his pocket and handed it to Mel Spear.

"I came to give it back to you, Mel," he said. "I forgot that I had it."

"No," she said, "you didn't. It was just another excuse to keep you from running away."

He thought about what she had said, and then he turned away.

"I'll be riding on now, I guess," he said.

"Don't run out on me, Pete," she told him. "I won't like it. Why don't you file on Uncle Cort's land—he'd want a man like you to have it."

He looked around quickly, wondering if she could be serious. He could see that she was, and he thought about the cabin, built straddling the line. They'd have to move it, and he'd have to build him one of his own. He was going to speak to her about it, but when he looked at her again, and saw the way she was smiling at him, he had a feeling that mavbe one cabin would be enough, after all. To Aragon, there seemed a promise for the future in her eyes, and he knew that he'd never be afraid any more.

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POWDER RIVER MAN

A True Story by R. C. HENRY

DURING the 1860's it is said that Secretary of War Stanton received constant complaints from a certain U.S. Army senior officer who wanted his regiment, the 27th Infantry, transferred to another post. At last Stanton became irritated by these incessant pleas, and snapped to his secretary, "Where, next to hell, is the worst possible place to send a regiment?"

"The Powder River country, sir!"

"Very well," growled Stanton. "Make out orders transferring the Twenty-seventh Regiment to Powder River and bring them to me. I'll sign them at once!"

Accordingly the 27th Regiment was shunted out to Powder River. And to youthful Dennis Driscoll, Irishman, ex-sailor, of Company K, 27th Infantry, life soon developed into something of a nightmare.

One evening, during the following

How Private Driscoll Defied Desperate Odds to Carry a Message Through the Heart of the Deadly Sioux Country

autumn, he found himself astride of a one-eyed mule, pursued by several hundred befeathered and war-painted Indians who were intent on collecting his scalp. It was an adventure as exciting as any that came out of the pioneer West, and began in this way:

Powder river, "a mile wide and a foot deep", flows through some of the most desolate country on earth. It is a tough river and a hard country. "Powder river, let 'er rip!" yelled the soldiers of the 91st on the Argonne during the First World War, battling with a fierceness as desperate as the land whence came their slogan, and even today among the cowboys of the West, a "Powder River man" rates more than cursory respect.

To protect a pioneer route from southern Wyoming into the gold fields of the Montana country the government in the early 1860's constructed a chain of forts along the southern boundary of the area which in 1889 was known officially as the state of Montana. Of these, the two with which young Private Dennis Driscoll was concerned were Forts C. F. Smith and Phil Kearney. Named after Civil war generals, the fortifications had a spotted history, among other difficulties resisting constant attacks from the Crow and Sioux Indians. The ruined walls of Fort C. F. Smith may still be seen today in the desolate country of southern Montana, far off any main highway.

Sioux Ambush Soldiers

Member of a military detachment on reconnaissance between Kearney and Smith, Dennis Driscoll like his fellow troopers kept his fingers crossed. Either somebody relaxed his fingers on the return journey or prayers were not strong enough in this instance, but a couple of days out of Smith headed for Kearney the detachment blundered into an ambush set by Sioux warriors, at odds of fifty painted redskins to every soldier.

Private Driscoll was astride a one-eyed mule when the attack came. Promptly the soldiers shot their horses to provide shelter, but Driscoll could not force himself to put a bullet in the head of his animal, for which he had a genuine affection. The stock which always accompanied such a military expedition stampeded. The soldiers huddled together and prepared for desperate siege. The outcome, assuming the mass of the enemy would not by sheer weight of numbers overcome the defenders, could never be in doubt; the soldiers saw with grim clarity that their time of life was short since they lacked adequate water supply and ammunition.

This was the era in which men of the freighting wagons, when surrounded by Indians, first corraled their wagons, then took the strings from their left boots, looped them at both ends and laid them conveniently at hand—the small loop to be slipped over the trigger of the rifle, the large loop for the man's boot. It did not pay to be taken alive by the redskins.

Dennis Driscoll, a sailor by profession for his short life, had enlisted in the East. Possibly the last century's recruiting come-on equivalent to the present, "good pay-travel-retirement" had lured him to sign up; obviously he had never expected to be waiting for death in this eroded country, this land of canyons and cut-banks and the curious, wind-carved rocks known as hoodoos, and the flat, flat prairie. He lay close to the hoofs of his one-eyed mule and though the sun of late autumn lacked heat, he sweated as one of last summer's 110-degree-in-the-shade-and-no-shade days. His mouth was as dry as dust and he had difficulty in swallowing. The men around him felt the same way; they spat out their quids of tobacco; fear dried up their mouths.

When the redskins had drawn off after their initial attack, the commanding officer of the detachment called, "Volunteers to reach Fort Smith!" Silence followed. It was too desperate—one man against possible two or three thousand. The odds against getting through were a million to one.

Again the commander called. Again no response.

"I reckon I'm the best man around," remarked Jack Henshaw, a Canadian

civilian, "but I won't try it! I'll take my chances on the buzzards picking my bones here!"

But Dennis Driscoll did not feel that way. His cheeks the color of chalk, he said, "I'll try, sir!" Canada Jack swore in a shout, unhooked his pair of guns and clapped them around Driscoll's hips. "Best guns in the country!" he said, "Your rifle's no good now; they'd just weigh you down." He pulled off his field glasses and dropped them by their whang lashings around Driscoll's neck.

The bitterly sharp air of Powder river night was chilling Driscoll when he climbed aboard the one-eyed mule. "Good luck," the soldiers muttered, and the commander called, "Ride fast, Driscoll!" So Dennis Driscoll rode forth. It was by a miracle that he eluded the redskin guards and penetrated beyond the Indian lines. Riding all night, he covered a distance great enough to convince him that he was safe. At dawn he halted on a ridge and looked back with his field-glasses. The prairie lay clear, except for a small herd of buffalo that seemed to be drifting in his direction.

More Indians Chase Him

Driscoll, the sweat on him chilled, breathed easier. He did not want to die on the prairie. If he had to die, his first love the sea offered the most hospitable grave. He said, "I'll be going back to the ships if I get out of this fix." He took out Canada Jack's guns and inspected them again, just in case; they were superior weapons, and Driscoll hefted them with joy, for he had trained himself to be an excellent shot with the pistol.

The buffalo group seemed to be drifting towards him with unusual speed. Driscoll, worried and tense with an anxiety which saw danger in everything, again focused his field-glasses on the shaggy animals. His heart leaped painfully—the buffalo hides were camouflage, each hide covering an Indian rider.

Driscoll drove his spurs into the one-eyed mule and raced away. The redskins saw they were discovered; they threw off their disguises and lashed their ponies to top speed. Driscoll's one-eyed mount struggled valiantly, but failed to draw away; Driscoll realized that escape by flight was impossible.

"Got to fight for it!" he said aloud, pulling the mule to a halt and spilling out of the saddle.

Reluctantly he shot the mule. The Indians whooped in triumph, confident of success, and they came forward now insolently and leisurely. Driscoll wiped his sweaty palms and gripped Canada Jack's guns. He waited until he knew he could not miss. Then, resting his wrists on the dead mule's sides, protecting himself with his mount's body, he cut loose.

He dropped possibly three or four warriors before the attackers withdrew, to huddle in council. Driscoll could see them debating, apparently with some heat, and he began to hope for a voluntary withdrawal. But instead they spread out, surrounding Driscoll, and set fire to the thick, dry prairie grass. Flames ten feet high and of such heat that no human being could withstand them leaped forward.

In a few small areas the dampness of the night before partially extinguished the flames, causing smoke thick as pea-soup fog to billow up. Driscoll hesitated, then the memory of the cool reaches of the sea roused him and he left the protection of the dead mule, to slip along on hands and knees. The smoke filled in his throat, brought blinding pain to his head, and small flames scorched his palms, singed his brows and lashes and the hair hanging down his forehead from under his trooper's hat. But by hunching over freshly burned ground he evaded both the flames and the redskins.

Soldier Eludes Redmen

Presently he found a creek, downwind; here at least was water. Driscoll, with hope of escape rising in him again, rolled forward, breaking the ice along the edges. A few feet at a time he worked his way upstream and where brush grew thickly

down to the water, waded ashore. For the second time he had eluded the red men.

Night now closed in. Cold bit into Driscoll's bones, numbed his cheeks and fingers. His boots, which he discovered with surprise were almost burned from his feet, offered little protection to his lacerated and singed toes. He stood for a time shivering on the prairie, in utter misery. Then he looked up, seeking the gleam of the North star to orient himself. Now came another shock; thick clouds had come scudding in and all stars were obscured. Driscoll cried a little and then, remembering his companions back there, under siege, he groped his way forward into what he hoped was the north, whence Fort Smith lay.

At intervals he paused to rest. Upon one of these occasions he inspected his guns carefully, made sure they were ready. The darkness now closed in more densely, due to thickening storm clouds, and Driscoll's eyes, already smarting from smoke and strain could scarcely see the broken prairie a few feet ahead of him. A couple of times he fell, forced himself only with desperate effort to rise.

In the grayness of dawn he stumbled into what he first took to be a group of sharp-tipped rocks. Then a dog barked shrilly, another and another. Driscoll halted, staring stupidly. The dawn advanced rapidly now, and in its light Driscoll recognized his surroundings—the outskirts of an Indian encampment!

Wearily, he turned and staggered off, hoping the alarm of the dogs would go unnoticed, but before he had managed to cover more than half a mile, a dozen war-painted bucks appeared in pursuit. They had not waited to catch horses; they were on foot. Daylight was coming now and there could be no escape in darkness. Driscoll broke into a dog trot, forcing his body to action only with the utmost effort.

But speed was not in him; the bucks, fresh from rest, raced on like a wolf pack. No chance to outrun them, Driscoll saw, so he dropped behind an upthrust of rock and drew his pistols.

He wavered but in this moment the calm of desperation took hold of him, cleared his eyes and calmed the trembling of his gun hands. He laid the sights of Canada Jack's pistols dead center and did not miss. In an almost fantastic exhibition of accuracy, he killed every one of his pursuers within the space of a minute. Then he waited, but no other red man appeared, and Driscoll reeled to his feet, groaning. He stumbled on.

He kept on the move all day. At dusk he dragged himself atop a rim of hills, from which he peered eagerly hoping to see the flag above the dark, sprawled mass of adobe that was the fort. But it was evening and the flag had been taken down; the fort, wherever it was, had become only a dark shadow lost in the blackness of the prairie.

Patrol Finds Driscoll

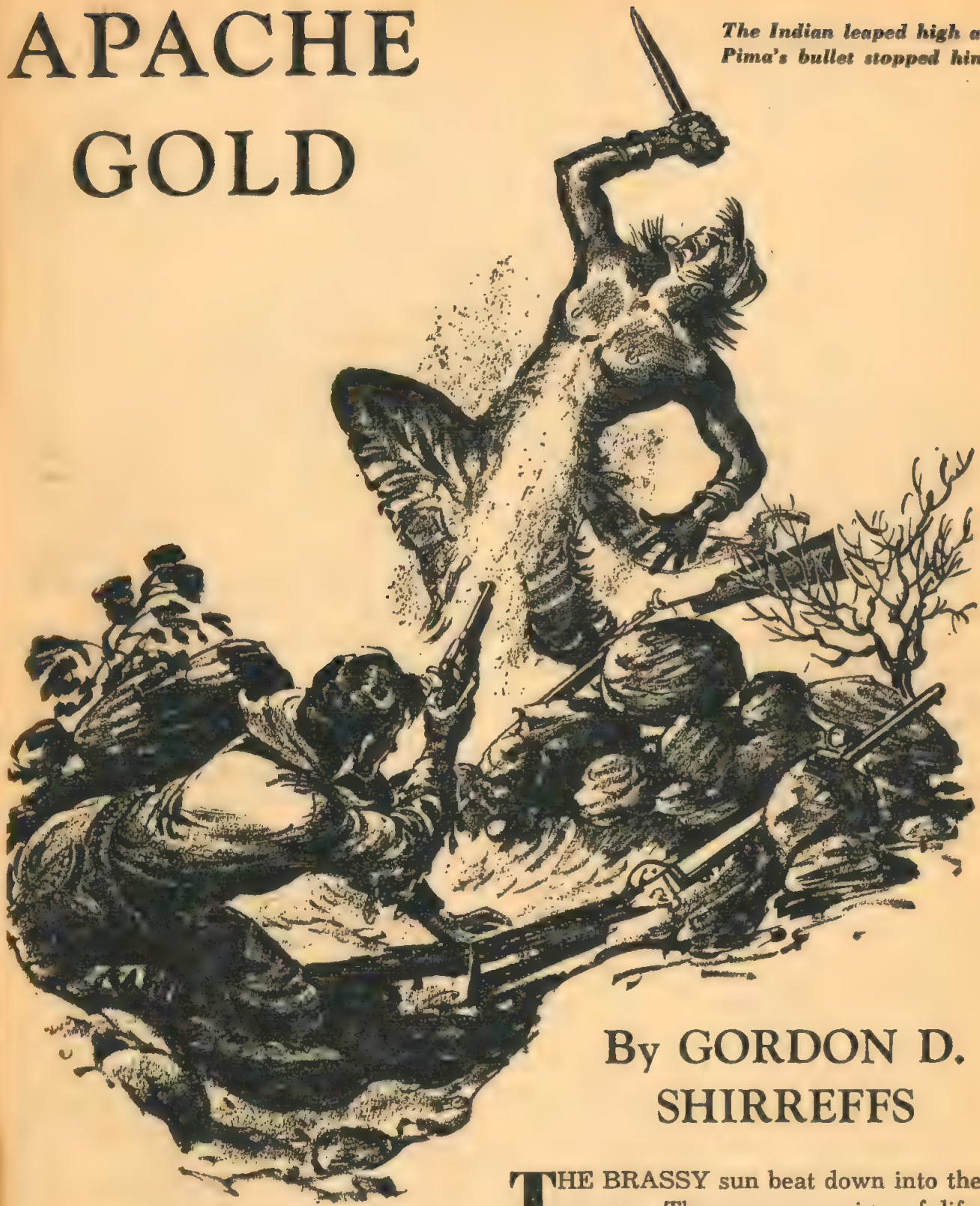
Reeling with weariness, he staggered down a hillside where his feet dropped into worn ruts and he followed them instinctively. Wheel tracks to the fort. But he never reached Smith conscious; he stumbled, his knees cracked the sod, and he lay very still. In the early dawn men headed for the fort found him and carried him in; from his ravings they learned of the siege down Kearney way. The fort commander sent out a relief expedition at once.

The relief was just in time, for heat and thirst had taken toll of the besieged. They raised a feeble cheer when their companions appeared and then dropped off to sleep, their first since the beginning of the siege.

Dennis Driscoll had got his message through, in a feat as daring as any in the heroic records of any nation. But no metal plaque or statue or story in schoolboy's book has ever honored him.

Driscoll spent six weeks on a hospital cot, then returned to duty. He never went back to sea, but remained in the Army. His last days, in the early 1900's, were spent in an Old Soldiers' home in California.

APACHE GOLD



The Indian leaped high as Pima's bullet stopped him

By GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

Pima didn't like killing—

but he had to wage

a one-man war against odds

THE BRASSY sun beat down into the canyon. There was no sign of life. Heat waves shimmered across the canyon floor. Pima Seton lay still, hardly daring to breathe. The stock of his Spencer carbine was hot to the touch. His finger rested on the trigger. The sights were lined up on a deep notch at the top of the canyon wall.

Pima risked a glance to his left. His elder brother, Dan, had vanished like a startled lizard. Pima looked to his right. "Greasy" Parker and Juanito had faded from view. A great feeling of loneliness crept over Pima. Sweat trickled down his face and dropped to the thirsty sand. The old fear was getting its familiar hold.

Pima looked up at the notch and began to tremble uncontrollably. A lone Apache sat his mount boldly silhouetted against the yellow sky. The sun glinted dully on the brass trim of his weapons. His dirty cotton shirt and calico headband stood out clearly. He sat there motionless for several minutes and then started down into the canyon.

Pima closed his eyes. Maybe the others had deserted him. Maybe he was there all alone. This time he would not be captured. He would not be tortured with knife and fire.

The Apache rode straight in front of Pima. Suddenly the Indian stopped and looked at the ground. He had seen where Dan had hastily scuffled sand over the bootprints. He quickly turned his head and his eyes bored into each clump of catclaw and mesquite. A low whistle came from Pima's left.

The Apache scout never had a chance. A slug from Dan's Sharps tore the life out of him. Two shots cracked from the right. Juanito and Greasy had gone into action a split second after Dan. They had taken no chances that the scout might escape.

PIMA relaxed his grip on the Spencer. He closed his eyes. Dan had told him to fire first. He knew Pima was a better shot than the rest of them. But something, Pima could not tell what, had frozen Pima's trigger finger. Greasy darted from the brush toward the scout. Juanito was just behind him. Dan sprinted past Pima. They were going to make sure of the scout. No Apache must know of the presence of four white men in the region of Snotahay, the fabulous lost gold canyon of Apacheria.

Pima got to his feet and joined the others. Dan looked queerly at Pima. Pima could not meet his eyes. Juanito looked slyly at him and grinned.

"You all right, Pima?" Dan asked.

Pima looked away from the dead Apache. "Yes. Let's get away from here."

Dan shook his head. "Got to get rid of his body first. That's why we ambushed him. He's been trailing us for two days." He looked up at the canyon wall. "We've got to move fast now. They'll miss him soon enough. Within three days every Apache between the San Francisco and Salt Rivers will be nosing around in here, and we're the quarry."

Pima helped Juanito drag the body to a deep crevice. Juanito nudged Pima. "You do not like thees killing, eh?"

Pima did not answer. There was desperate fear in him that the Apaches might find them doing their gruesome job. Juanito grinned; he knew Pima's secret.

After the body was well concealed, they led the Apache's horse to where they had hidden their own mounts in a deep draw. They rode steadily for hours until they had placed thirty miles between themselves and the scene of the ambush. They made a fireless camp in a scattered grove just as twilight softened the light. When the simple camp chores were done, there was nothing to do but think. Greasy Parker rubbed a hand on his bristly chin and grinned at Pima.

"Nice moonlit night, eh, boy?" Parker said. "Wish we was back in Tucson."

Dan Seton came silently through the brush. He had been with the horses which were picketed a quarter of a mile from the camp. "Be patient, Greasy," Dan advised. "Wait until we get the gold before you spend it."

Juanito laughed. "It will not last long with that one."

Pima looked at Dan. "How are the horses?"

"We'll leave the mare behind with you. That leg is still tender."

"Your mind is still made up?"

Dan hunkered down and poured a cup of cold coffee. "It isn't that I don't want to take you, Pima. But the last part of

the trip in, and until we get back to the horses, will be on foot. You couldn't make any time."

Pima unconsciously touched his left leg. Since the Chiricahuas had raided his father's ranch ten years before he had been lame. He had seen his father and mother die. But worst of all, he remembered the impassive faces of the Apaches as they worked on him with their knives. He remembered the stink of *tiswin* on their breath and the rank animal smell of their clothing. They had filled his soul with unholy fear. He had been saved by a party of peaceful Pimas bent on revenge for the Apaches' murder of a Pima chief.

The Pimas had taken care of young Seton. They had kept him until Dan had been discharged from the California volunteers serving against the Confederates in New Mexico Territory. Big Dan had never mentioned their father and mother nor did he ever speak of Pima's handicap unless forced by circumstances. This instance was the first time in many years he had mentioned it.

GREASY tapped Pima's shoulder. "You'll get your share, son. You'll get a hatful of nuggets. You done your share, cookin' and all."

"Nuggets," said Pima slowly, "Nuggets. You never say dust—just nuggets. Is it really as good as all that, Greasy?"

Greasy spread his gnarled hands wide. "I had these dirty hands full of 'em once. They was as big as wild turkey eggs. They was droppin' on all sides of me like hailstones when the Apaches jumped our camp." His eyes glowed like a fanatic's. "There was three of us, with pokes crammed to the top and a salt sack full to burstin' buried near our camp. It's still there. All of it. There ain't been no one in *there* to get it, neither."

Pima looked at Juanito and Dan. They sat still, their faces hidden in the shadow of their hats but it seemed as though Pima could feel their hunger for the gold. Greasy sat lost in his memories. Pima shifted his position. It broke the spell.

"Yep," said Greasy softly, "There ain't been no one in *there* to get it. It ain't no bank vault but it's got the best set of guards any vault could have. It must be in there."

Juanito leaned forward. "You are sure, old one?"

Greasy spat. "They ain't nobody found that place. Ain't nobody but me and Dan got the guts to go into a place like that."

Juanito sat back. He rubbed his hands slowly down the front of his shirt. "We will be rich. I will become a *ranchero*. They will call me *Don*."

Pima looked at his shadowy face. Juanito had fallen in with them at Tucson. Greasy had talked too much one night in a cantina. Juanito had come along to their camp the next day. If he was not cut in, he had said, he had many friends who would be interested in this tale of lost gold. Juanito was lucky. Dan Seton, rather than risk trouble, had told Juanito to come along. It was another rifle and Juanito knew the country well. But Juanito looked with scorn on Pima. He had once asked Greasy why such a one, a cripple, should share and share alike with whole men. Greasy's knife had been tickling the Mexican's stomach before he had finished his talk. Thereafter Juanito kept clear of the two big men, but found time to make life miserable for Pima.

"What will you do with your gold, Greasy?" asked Pima.

Greasy wrapped his long arms about his body and looked at Pima with tilted head. "First a spree in Tucson. Then maybe a ride up to Santa Fe. Then I'll head east. I'll get me a fancy frock coat and a checkered vest. I'll live like a dude in Chicago and New York. There ain't anythin' I won't do. Maybe I'll even go to Europe."

Dan paced back and forth. He looked up at the bright moon. "It's west for me. There's good land in California. A man could be a power out there with the gold to back him. I'll buy a ranch and raise the best cattle west of the Mississippi. I'll take a fling at politics. Senator Daniel A. Seton. How does that sound, Pima?"

"Fine. You've got the brains, Dan."

Dan looked down at him. "And you. How will you spend your share?"

PIMA touched his leg. "I'll spend every cent on this leg. Somewhere I'll find a doctor who can make it well again. It can be fixed. It's got to be fixed." He got to his feet and gripped Dan's arm. "But you've got to let me go along. I can keep up. I can shoot better than any of you. You'll need me."

Juanito laughed. "I did not see any of thees remarkable shooting today when we trapped that Apache."

Pima was tempted to smash a fist into the Mexican's face. But it was foolish. They were so close to the treasure now. He would not start trouble. Dan stepped close to Juanito.

"Don't push your luck too far, Juanito," Dan warned.

Juanito waved a hand. "It was but a joke, *amigo,*" he said hastily, "I did not mean to start the trouble."

Dan turned away. He placed a hand on Pima's shoulder. "Greasy says this place we are going into is Apache holy ground. He saw skeletons lyin' there with smashed skulls. You know what that means? They smash the skulls of the slain to keep their spirits from roaming about at night. But I'm willing to bet no Apache will hang about that place at night, despite their precautions. They don't like the night and its demons. We'll get in there at night, grab the gold, and hightail it back here. Your job is to take care of the spare horses. If we lose them, we die!"

The moon flooded the land with a clear cold light. Greasy picked up a stick and began to draw in the sand. "The canyon is well hidden, and is about twenty miles due west. You can't see nothin' but low hills from this side. There's three rounded *piloncillos,* just beyond the canyon. You cut into the hills, keepin' the *piloncillos* directly before you, lookin' like a giant's shoulders topped with three heads, if there was such a thing. There's a zig-zag little canyon that cuts right through the heart of them hills close up beneath the *piloncillos.*" Greasy looked up at Dan. "That zig-zag canyon is the only way in and the only way out. If the Apaches stop up that canyon, we'll sit there until they come in and get us. So, as you say, we got to get in there fast, grab the loot, and get out—fast!"

"It doesn't seem possible gold is there, lying around like you say," mused Dan.

Greasy spoke quickly. "It's there for them as has got the guts to go and get it!"

"If there is but the one way to get out and the Apaches trapped you and your friends in there, how did *you* get away?" asked Juanito.

Greasy ran a hand over his mouth. "They chased my two partners up the canyon. I took a long chance and dived into the spring. They passed me so close their moccasins splashed mud into my face. I backtracked towards the entrance. I swear I didn't move more than an inch an hour. I got to the zig-zag canyon; the devils had left it open. Maybe they figured they'd ride me down after they finished off my two friends. It seemed as though I could still hear 'em screamin', long after I was out of the zig-zag canyon and in the hills. Maybe it was all in my mind. I didn't have the guts to go back until Dan talked me into it."

When the moon died the three men rode from the camp. Dan gripped Pima's shoulders. "Keep up your courage. We'll be back the day after tomorrow. Our horses will be worn out. Have the others ready." Dan swung himself into his saddle and sat for a moment looking down at Pima. Greasy whistled shrilly. Dan spurred the big roan and disappeared into the shadows. Pima stood there a long time listening.

BECAUSE of his anxiety, Pima did not sleep that night. At dawn he went to check the horses. He led them to the shallow trickle that ran through the grove. The Apache horse seemed well content. He was sturdy and in good shape. He was a welcome addition to the expedition.

Pima prowled through the cottonwood grove all day. He heard nothing but the whir of the locusts. Fleecy clouds drifted

across the intensely blue sky. He forced himself to keep from thinking of Dan. Dan had fixed it so Pima wouldn't have to go to Snotahay. It would have been just as easy to bring the spare horses closer to the lost canyon. There was little less risk keeping them in the grove.

By late afternoon Pima was in bad shape. He started at the slightest sound. He constantly loosened his Colt in its holster. An Apache could creep up on him and strike before Pima knew he was not alone. Sweat soaked his shirt. His neck grew tired from his constant turning to look behind him. He lay for a long time in a hollow, gripping his Spencer and staring at the low eastern hills.

At twilight he chewed listlessly on a scrap of jerky. Soon his companions would be flitting up the zig-zag canyon with death hovering about. Death with two white bands across the bridge of its nose. Death with a calico headband and buckskin breechclout. Death with a red skin and the knowledge to make a wounded man suffer the tortures of hell long before he died.

The soft footstep sent Pima to his feet in one nervous bound. His hand shot out to his Spencer. His clumsiness sent the heavy carbine crashing to the ground. Pima clawed at his Colt as he ran for the brush.

"Why do you run, half-pint?"

Pima spun about. Juanito stepped softly out from the shadow of the trees. "Is this how you guard the horses?" the Mexican sneered. "If I were an Apache you would be dead now."

Pima dropped his hand from his Colt. "Where are the others? Did they turn back?"

Juanito picked up a piece of jerky and chewed it. "No. They are probably starting up the canyon now. My horse went lame. Dan sent me back." His eyes studied Pima over the piece of meat.

Pima picked up his carbine and leaned it against a tree. Dan had personally inspected each of the horses before they had left. There had been nothing wrong with them then.

"Have you seen any *Indios?*" the Mexican asked.

Pima shook his head.

Juanito grinned. "It is well. Oh, I have lost my rifle. Let me take your carbine for a time. You have your pistol." The Mexican moved quickly before Pima could protest and cradled the heavy Spencer in his arms. "This is a fine weapon, *amigo.* It is a heavy gun for such as you."

Pima did not speak. He sat down on a log and watched Juanito. He was up to something. Pima had never trusted Juanito. Dan had tolerated him to prevent trouble. If he had turned Juanito down the Mexican would have probably trailed them with some of his cutthroat American and Mexican friends from the dives of Tucson.

Juanito walked towards the hiding place of the horses. "I will see that they are well."

Pima limped after him. The Mexican looked carefully at each of the animals and then to the west. He walked to the eastern side of the grove and stood there for a long time. Pima wandered about the grove. Suddenly he came upon the Mexican's buckskin, the one he had ridden to the canyon. Juanito's long barreled singleshot rifle hung in its boot beside the saddle. Pima looked at the buckskin's legs. There was no swelling. He ran his hands swiftly up and down them. There was nothing wrong that he could see. He inspected the hoofs. He led the horse about in a circle. If the buckskin had been lame he did not show it now.

"You find nothing wrong with my *caballo?*"

STARTLED, Pima spun about. He stared into the muzzle of his Spencer.

"It is a shame that you must die from a shot from your own gun, *chaporito.*"

"Why do you do this, Juanito?"

Juanito's ego could not pass such a chance to show how clever he really was. "It is easy. I but rode with your brother and Greasy to find this canyon of gold. They were so fired with the thought of being near those riches that they did not

see me place the stone beneath the shoe of my *caballo*. Therefore they told me to return and they would bring the gold. Now I am here. When they bring the gold, Juanito will lie in wait for them with this fine weapon that shoots many times without reloading. Two shots and the gold is mine. Is it not a fine plan, *chaporito?*"

There was no need to ask him what would happen before Dan and Greasy got back. The Spencer wavered and settled at Pima's heart. Juanito's hand tightened on the stock.

Pima tried to speak. He looked beyond the Mexican. His eyes widened. Juanito looked quickly behind him. Puffs of smoke rose from the low hills where they had ambushed the Apaches.

"*Los Indios!*" Juanito yelled. "They have found the body. They will be here soon."

Pima looked to the west. There was a long chance that he might get to the lost canyon first. Juanito placed the muzzle of the Spencer against Pima's chest.

"You will die here. The Apaches will take very good care of your brother and Greasy. Then I will have the secret of the gold. I can go back to safety and return to the canyon when it is safe to go there."

"Listen!" Pima looked beyond the Mexican. Again his eyes widened in sudden fright.

Juanito turned his head.

Pima slapped a hand down quickly against the carbine barrel. He slammed a right to Juanito's jaw. The Mexican staggered back. Pima yanked the Spencer from his hands. Juanito whipped out his knife. Pima swung the barrel hard against the side of Juanito's head. The Mexican grunted and went down on his knees. The butt caught him behind the right ear. Juanito fell flat on his face and lay still. Pima was shaking uncontrollably. He had no time to waste. The Mexican would be unconscious for quite a while.

Pima moved swiftly. He slashed the tether of the Mexican's horse so that Juanito would have to trail him. He doubted whether the Mexican would come near the lost canyon now that he had shown his hand. He drove the spare horses to the west until he had put many miles between himself and the grove. He picketed them in a deep arroyo that had plenty of grass and a shallow pan of water.

The low hills loomed to the west. Somewhere in them Dan and Greasy were far up the zig-zag canyon. If the Apaches were riding straight for the lost canyon, Pima would not have time to warn Dan and Greasy. Fear rode saddlemate with Pima Seton. Time and again he looked behind him through the darkness. Fear made him hear things that did not exist. Time and again he swung the Spencer quickly as he saw the tufted head of a yucca.

HE REACHED the low hills in the false dawn. There was no sign of life. He hid his horse and slung his big canteen from his shoulder. He checked his weapons and stuffed his pockets with extra cartridges from his saddle-bags. He walked swiftly towards the hills. He strained his eyes in the gloom. He saw the humped shapes of the three *piloncillos*. He walked back and forth trying to visualize the shape Greasy had described. "A giant's shoulders with three heads," Greasy had said. Pima stared at the *piloncillos*. It was no use. He looked up at the sky and prayed for the first time in many years. He walked forward until the hills slanted up before him. He stared.

The sky had lightened. The three *piloncillos* seemed to have changed. He closed his eyes and opened them quickly. There it was! Broad rugged shoulders topped by three craggy heads! The light revealed a dark slash of shadow on the flank of the hill directly in front of him. He walked to it. Almost as though by magic a narrow canyon opened before him. He looked back.

The eastern sky was shot with rose and gold. The sun would soon flood the desert. He looked into the cool shadows before him. He eased his Colt in its holster. Sweat trickled down his sides. His mouth was dry. He was afraid to go back and

deathly afraid of going forward. He leaned back against a huge boulder. He tried to get a grip on his nerves. It was no use; he could not do it.

Long minutes dragged by. A faint breeze sighed through the canyon. Pima shook his head. It seemed to be a distant dirge for his brother and Greasy. The thought of them lying staring at the sky with sightless eyes at last forced Pima to go forward. The sun had touched the sky. Its light showed high walls of castellated red limestone. There were times when Pima could touch the walls on either side with his hands. High on the walls he could see bits of driftwood and dried brush wedged in crevices. A cloudburst would fill that narrow passage like a mill-race.

He plodded forward. Pictures formed in his mind—word pictures that Greasy had painted for him of Apache tortures. Greasy had a knack for vivid description. Pima slowed down. His own imagination had always been too lively. He shuddered a little and stopped. He looked back down the passage. Suppose they were already coming in behind him? His mouth went dry and his hands shook. He plodded stubbornly on. He had never figured out why men like Greasy kept coming back to hostile country. It was probably the perverseness of his wandering breed that brought him back to the strange brooding wilds.

The canyon began to widen and soon reached a width of at least five hundred yards. It stretched on far to the end where a shadowy mouth showed dimly against rock. That must be the entrance to Snotahay. Pima looked about for a place to scale the wall. Great cracks and slopes of detritus appeared at intervals.

Pima slung his Spencer over his back and tightened his belt. He removed his spurs and trotted to the base of the wall. He began to climb slowly testing each step carefully. It would not do to fall and break a leg. He did not look behind him. He did not dare. It would have been hard work for a man with two good legs. His weak

[*Turn page*]

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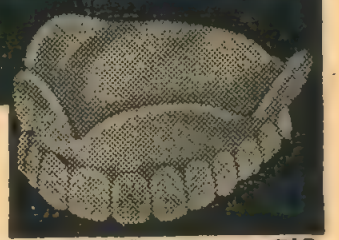

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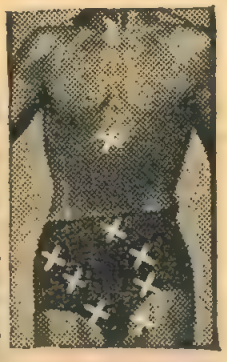

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leg dragged behind. Sweat poured down his body as he clung to precarious handholds. Fear drove him on. At last he reached a place from where a great boulder had fallen to the floor of the canyon. It had left a shallow depression about ten feet in diameter. Pima piled loose rock along the lip of the depression. He left loopholes and cut scrub brush to conceal the regularity of his fort.

AS LONG as he was busy, he worked off some of the fear. But when at last he was done, it returned again worse than ever. He laid out a row of cartridge tubes on a flat rock beside him. He had six tubes and each of them held seven cartridges. That, with the full tube magazine of seven in the carbine, gave him forty-nine rounds. His Colt had thirty rounds. He would have liked to try some sighting shots but the crash of the heavy carbine would have sent echoes that could be heard a long distance.

Pima lay very quietly watching the light change on the canyon walls. A hawk circled slowly overhead and then suddenly sailed off before the wind. Pima looked down at the entrance to the canyon. A shadow moved. Pima cocked the Spencer. The click seemed unnaturally loud. Nothing seemed different. Long minutes trickled by. He was getting too skittery. An icy finger seemed to trace the length of his spine. An Apache had materialized from the shadows.

Pima froze. The stock of his Spencer was greasy with sweat. The Apache dismounted and studied the ground. He looked for a long time at the canyon walls and then led his pony slowly forward until he reached the shadowed passage at the far end of the canyon. He picketed his pony and entered the passage.

Fifteen long minutes crept by. Another Apache rode into the canyon. In a few minutes he was followed by ten more. Their lances pointed above their heads like slender deadly fingers. Rifles were balanced across naked brown thighs.

Pima drew in a deep breath. He touched the butt of his Colt, loosened his shirt col-

lar, and then cuddled the Spencer to his cheek. The front sight wavered and then settled on the naked back of the first horseman. He squeezed off.

The roar of the Spencer awoke the canyon echoes. The report slammed back and forth between the walls. Acrid smoke blew back against Pima's face. A high-pitched scream followed the shot echoes. Pima levered another round into the chamber before he looked down. The Apache lay still on the ground. His pony was racing wildly down the canyon. The rest of the Apaches were milling about trying to reach cover. They dreaded surprise far more than anything else. Pima's second shot plowed into a pony and sent it to the ground with thrashing hoofs. His third shot spun the dismounted warrior about and dropped him.

Dust whirled about the yelling Apaches. Pima poured the last four rounds into them as they scuttled for cover. He slid another tube through the butt gate as the smoke and dust drifted off. There was a flash from a clump of prickly pear and a slug sang thinly past Pima's head. A buck stepped out from behind a slab of rock for a clean shot at Pima. The big fifty caliber slug smashed the life out of him.

A ricochet sent needle-like splinters into Pima's face. He fired rapidly at every exposed arm or leg he could see. He emptied his second tube and poured water over his carbine barrel. It was too hot to touch and heat mist had formed along the barrel when he tried to sight.

The canyon seemed empty. The three dead warriors and two downed ponies were the only signs that the war party had actually been there. Pima stared at the brush and rocks of the canyon floor until they swam before his eyes. Blood from the lead splinters trickled down his face.

Somewhere, probably not too far from him, were eight human tigers thirsting for his blood. He had never felt so lonely in his life. A half hour dragged past and he had not seen so much as a finger exposed for a snap shot. He began to chuckle and then to laugh. He stood up recklessly.

[*Turn page*]

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A rifle cracked flatly. Pima's hat sailed off his head. He fired at a brown arm protruding from a clump of mesquite not one hundred feet from his position. He dropped as rifles roared and a fusillade of lead smashed against the rock wall behind him. A flattened slug glanced off his shoulder. Another creased the side of his head. Shrill whooping rang out.

PIMA began to laugh again. The heat of battle had burned fear from his soul. He would die, but as a man, not as a craven with mush for guts. The killing craze misted his mind. He ran his Spencer dry and drew his Colt. He held his sheath knife in his left hand. He braced his weak leg against a boulder.

Moccasined feet slapped against rock. A squat brave came into sight. He leaped high to clear the barricade. The .44 slug dropped him. A screaming Apache buck raised a Henry rifle, not twenty feet from Pima. Two shots ripped into him. Pima snatched up the Spencer and fumbled with the loading gate. He reached for a fresh magazine tube. Something rapped into his left shoulder. Dust puffed from his jacket. Something warm ran down his left arm. He had been hit.

A shrieking warrior launched himself over the breastwork. He closed with Pima. The rank smell of his clothing poured into Pima's nostrils. Shots crackled out all along the canyon wall. Pima laughed wildly. The Apaches could just as easily hit their own man. He forced a leg behind the brave and pushed him back. The buck went down and dragged Pima with him. They rolled over and over. Pima heard a hoarse shout and another fusillade.

Pima felt the Apache's muscles strain against his. He slowly forced the warrior's knife hand back. The Apache dug at Pima's face with his free hand. The knife clattered against the rock. Pima slammed the brave's head hard against the floor of the pit. The Apache stiffened and then lay still. Pima fell weakly across his opponent. Feet scuffled and clattered in the loose rock outside the breastwork. Pima tried to get up. Sweat poured down his

face. He got to his knees and scrabbled for his Colt. He cocked it and swung about.

"That Apache is dead, Pima." It was Dan Seton's steady voice.

Pima stared at him incredulously. "How did *you* get here? There was no chance that I'd get out of this alive. No chance at all. . . ." His voice trailed off.

Dan climbed over the breastwork. His big hands gripped Pima's shoulders. "We were on the way out when we heard your one-man war. Greasy had already scuppered the scout who rode ahead of the war party. We doubled up on the pony he left just outside the entrance to Snotahay. We got here in time to see them climbing up here. I got two of them with my Sharps."

"At five hundred yards," a dry voice cut in. "At five hundred yards and not an inch less." It was Greasy. He tied a knot in the bandage binding his left wrist and drew it tight with his teeth. He looked about. "You sure raised Cain with 'em, Pima. I never figured you had it in you to put up a fracas like this."

Dan reached inside his shirt. He dragged out two heavy dirty leather pouches. He weighed them in his hands and grinned at Pima. "We got 'em full of nuggets, kid. These and the salt bag as well. We'll give Juanito his share just to keep him quiet. Then we're off to feed on the fat of the land."

Pima shook his head. "Juanito planned to dry-gulch you on your return. I buffaloed him with the barrel of my Spencer and left him in the grove. He won't dare bother us again."

Greasy whistled. He waggled his head. "Who *is* this hombre, Dan?"

"A hombre who doesn't need this gold, Greasy. He won more than gold when he came after his brother and his friend to save them."

Pima quickly snatched a bag of gold from Dan. "Don't try to talk me out of my share, Dan. I feel as though I've really earned it now."

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As the direct factory man handling the quick-selling line of this 47-year old, million-dollar company you have a limitless market, because everybody wears shoes. Start by selling to relatives, friends, neighbors. That will prove the fine quality leathers—superb craftsmanship—money-saving value—and unequalled comfort-fit! Then branch out on a big scale.

It's easy to fit folks in the exact style they want—no need to substitute—you draw on our huge factory stock of over 175,000 pairs plus huge daily factory production.

Sales build up from friend to friend quickly, like a snowball. Recommendations, repeat orders and new customers build you a big income in a surprisingly short time. No wonder some of our top Shoe Counselors make from $5 to $10 every hour they spend taking orders!

EXCLUSIVE FEATURES

People demand nationally advertised Mason Shoes because of their exclusive comfort features, up-to-the-minute styling. Foamy-soft exclusive Velvet-Eez Air Cushion innersole makes walking a real pleasure—like "walking on air!" Ten-second demonstration lets customer actually feel air cushion, brings quick sales!

These splendid shoes bear famous Good Housekeeping Guarantee Seal.

Velvet-eez

BIG, STEADY PROFITS FOR YOU — NO OVERHEAD!

That's right! You have all the advantages of a profitable shoe store business without the expenses of rent, light, heat, etc. You are independent and invest nothing but your time. Your generous profit is ALL YOURS! No wonder Mason men are making more money than ever before. Even if you start in spare time, you will soon want to devote full time to this steady, repeat-order big-income business!

No Experience Needed . . . Make Money First Hour!

You need no experience to make money right away. Some men have made up to 20 sales their first day. You feature 151 styles of smart dress shoes, casual sport shoes, and practical work and service shoes for men and women, boots and fine leather jackets, too.

Sell to service station and garage men, waiters, factory workers, barbers, waitresses, nurses, housewives — everybody! Such features as Rugged Horsehide Shoes, Neoprene Oil-Resistant Soles, Gro-Cork Slip-Resistant Soles, Steel Safety Toe shoes make Mason Shoes easy to sell.

SEND NOW!

I have a powerful Selling Outfit I'm going to send you absolutely FREE as soon as I receive your coupon. This outfit includes actual 10-second demonstrator, famous Automatic Selling Plan, and features exclusive Velvet-Eez Air-Cushion shoes, fine leather jackets—other fast-selling specialties. To take advantage of this opportunity of your life, rush me the coupon below NOW! You'll be glad you did!

SEND FOR FREE OUTFIT

Mr. Ned Mason, Sales Manager
Mason Shoe Mfg. Co., Dept. M-903
Chippewa Falls, Wisc.

Please put a "Shoe Store Business" in my pocket by rushing FREE and postpaid your Powerful Selling Outfit — so I can start making Big Money my very first hour!

Name .....

Age .....

Address .....

Town .....State .....

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-903, Chippewa Falls, Wisc.